Human Nature:  
the Categorial Framework

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For

Hans Oberdiek
## Contents

Preface xi  

Chapter 1 The Project 1  
1. Human nature 1  
2. Philosophical anthropology 4  
3. Grammatical investigation 7  
4. Philosophical investigation 11  
5. Philosophy and ‘mere words’ 14  
6. A challenge to the autonomy of the philosophical enterprise: Quine 17  
7. The Platonic and Aristotelian traditions in philosophical anthropology 21  

Chapter 2 Substance 29  
1. Substances: things 29  
2. Substances: stuffs 34  
3. Substance-referring expressions 37  
4. Conceptual connections between things and stuffs 42  
5. Substances and their substantial parts 44  
6. Substances conceived as natural kinds 45  
7. Substances conceived as a common logico-linguistic category 49  
8. A historical digression: misconceptions of the category of substance 51
Chapter 3  Causation  
1. Causation: Humean, neo-Humean and anti-Humean 57  
2. On causal necessity 62  
3. Event causation is not a prototype 65  
4. The inadequacy of Hume’s analysis: observability, spatio-temporal relations and regularity 69  
5. The flaw in the early modern debate 73  
6. Agent causation as prototype 75  
7. Agent causation is only a prototype 80  
8. Event causation and other centres of variation 82  
9. Overview 88  

Chapter 4  Powers  
1. Possibility 90  
2. Powers of the inanimate 93  
3. Active and passive powers of the inanimate 96  
4. Power and its actualization 98  
5. Power and its vehicle 103  
6. First- and second-order powers; loss of power 105  
7. Human powers: basic distinctions 106  
8. Human powers: further distinctions 114  
9. Dispositions 118  

Chapter 5  Agency  
1. Inanimate agents 122  
2. Inanimate needs 128  
3. Animate agents: needs and wants 130  
4. Volitional agency: preliminaries 137  
5. Doings, acts and actions 140  
6. Human agency and action 144  
7. A historical overview 146  
8. Human action as agential causation of movement 153  

Chapter 6  Teleology and Teleological Explanation  
1. Teleology and purpose 161  
2. What things have a purpose? 169  
3. Purpose and axiology 175  
4. The beneficial 180  
5. A historical digression: teleology and causality 181
Chapter 7  Reasons and Explanation of Human Action 199
1. Rationality and reasonableness 199
2. Reason, reasoning and reasons 203
3. Explaining human behaviour 210
4. Explanation in terms of agential reasons 220
5. Causal mythologies 226

Chapter 8  The Mind 233
1. Homo loquens 233
2. The Cartesian mind 240
3. The nature of the mind 248

Chapter 9  The Self and the Body 257
1. The emergence of the philosophers’ self 257
2. The illusion of the philosophers’ self 261
3. The body 268
4. The relationship between human beings and their bodies 276

Chapter 10  The Person 285
1. The emergence of the concept 285
2. An unholy trinity: Descartes, Locke and Hume 289
3. Changing bodies and switching brains: puzzle cases and red herrings 301
4. The concept of a person 310

Index 317
Preface

Philosophy is of little worth unless it aspires to give an overview of a whole domain of thought, to display the ramifying network of conceptual relationships that characterize it, and to resolve problems and puzzlements that characteristically accompany reflection on it. As I reached the end of my academic career, I felt a powerful urge to paint a last large fresco that would depict, sometimes with broad brush, sometimes in fine detail, themes which I had studied and reflected on for the last forty years. The domain I have striven to portray in this book is that of human nature. I have tried to give a perspicuous representation of the most fundamental concepts and conceptual forms in terms of which we think about ourselves. These range from the most general categorial concepts of substance, causation, power and agency to the more specific and specifically anthropological concepts of rationality, mind, body and person. This book, Human Nature: The Categorial Framework, sketches the structural background and paints the central landmarks of the panorama I have in view. I intend to continue my endeavours in a volume entitled Human Nature: The Cognitive and Cogitative Powers that will add to the fresco more and finer detail. If time and fortune permit, I hope to write a concluding volume, Human Nature: The Affective and Moral Powers.

To enable readers, especially students, to take in at a glance some parts of my argument and some of the classifications elaborated, I introduced the occasional tree diagram and comparative list. These are often no more than illustrations to the text, sometimes oversimplifying for purposes of surveyability. They are meant to illuminate the argument, as a picture illustrates a story, not to be a substitute for it.
Many friends and acquaintances have encouraged me and given me moral support in the course of writing this book. One of the delights of philosophy is discussion with others who toil on the same rocky pathways and jungle trails, and who not only hold out a helping hand when one slips, and correct one when one takes a wrong path, but also help one blaze a trail. I have been blessed with such friends. If, in the course of these numerous discussions, merriment kept breaking through – as indeed it did – I never found this an impediment to philosophy, but a mark of shared delight in the common pursuit of understanding.

I am grateful to Maria Alvarez, Erich Ammereller, Hanoch Ben-Yami, Stephan Blatti, John Dupré, Hanjo Glock, the late Oswald Hanfling, John Hyman, Wolfgang Künne, Anselm Müller, Bede Rundle, Constantine Sandis, the late Peter Strawson, and David Wiggins, who all read one or more (and some read many more) of the chapters and gave me the great benefit of their criticisms and suggestions. I should like to record my gratitude to Anthony Kenny, whose encouragement in this enterprise, as in others in the past, spurred me on. I have learnt more from his luminous writings and incisive remarks than I can say. I owe a special debt to Hans Oberdiek and to Herman Philipse, who kindly read the whole draft, and whose detailed comments and suggestions were invaluable. I am, as I have so often been in the past, much indebted to Jean van Altena for her expert copy-editing and judicious advice.

I am happy to record my gratitude to my college, St John’s, which is unstinting in its support of scholarship, the pursuit of knowledge and the quest for understanding.

Chapter 2 of this book is a modified version of the paper entitled ‘Substance: Things and Stuffs’, published in the Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, suppl. vol. 78 (2004), pp. 41–63. A much shortened version of chapters 8 and 9 was delivered as a plenary lecture at Kirchberg, August 2006, and is to be published in the Proceedings of the 29th International Wittgenstein Symposium. A variant of the same paper was delivered as the opening address at the meeting of the British Society for the Philosophy of Education in Oxford, March 2006. A part of chapter 7 is to be published in Constantine Sandis (ed.), New Essays on the Explanation of Action.

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les principes sont dans l’usage commun et devant les yeux de tout le monde. On n’a que faire de tourner la tête, ni de se faire violence; il n’est question que d’avoir bonne vue. Mais il faut l’avoir bonne, car les principes sont si déliés, et en si grand nombre qu’il est presque impossible qu’il n’en échappe. Or l’omission d’un principe mène à l’erreur. Ainsi il faut avoir la vue bien nette pour voir tous les principes, et ensuite l’esprit juste pour raisonner faussement sur des principes connus.

the principles are found in common use, and are there for all to see. One has only to look, and no effort is necessary; it is only a question of good eyesight, but it must be good, for the principles are so subtle and numerous, that it is almost impossible but that some escape notice. Now the omission of one principle leads to error; so one needs very clear sight to see all the principles, as well as an accurate mind to avoid drawing false conclusions from known principles.

Pascal, *Pensées*, I, 1
1. Human nature

Human beings are animals with a distinctive range of abilities. Though they have a mind, they are not identical with the mind they have. Though they have a body, they are not identical with the body they have. Nor is a human being a conjunction of a mind and a body that causally interact with each other. Like other animals, human beings have a brain on the normal functioning of which their powers depend. But a human person is not a brain enclosed in a skull. A mature human being is a self-conscious agent, with the ability to act, and to react in thought, feeling and deed, for reasons.

Animals, like inanimate objects, are spatio-temporal continuants. They have a physical location and trace a continuous spatio-temporal path through the world. In this sense, they are, like familiar material objects, bodies located on, and moving on, the face of the earth. They are substances, persistent individual things that are classifiable into various substantial kinds according to their nature and our interests. (What counts as such a classifying noun will be examined in chapter 2.) Animals are animate substances – living things. So, unlike mere material objects, they ingest matter from their environment and metabolize it in order to provide energy for their growth, their distinctive forms of activity, and their reproduction. Unlike plants, animals are sentient agents, and all but the lowliest forms of animal life are also self-moving. Their sentience is exhibited in their exercise of the sense-faculties they possess: for example, the perceptual faculties of sight, hearing, smell, taste and feeling, and in the actualization of their passive powers of sensation: for example, susceptibility to pain, kinaesthetic
sensation and liability to overall bodily feelings, such as feeling tired, and feelings of overall condition, such as feeling well. The perceptive faculties are cognitive. They are sources of knowledge about the perceptible environment. It is by the exercise of these sense-faculties, by the use of the sense-organs that are their vehicles, that animals learn about the objects in, and features of, their environment. Being sentient and being self-moving are complementary powers of animal agency. For an animal that can learn how things are in its vicinity exhibits what it has apprehended both in its finding the things it seeks (such as food, protective environment, a mate) and in its avoiding obstacles and dangers. The criteria for whether an animal has perceived something lie in its responsive behaviour – so perception, knowledge and belief, affection, desire and action are conceptually linked.

The abilities distinctive of human beings are abilities of intellect and will. The relevant abilities of intellect are thought, imagination (the cogitative and creative imagination rather than the image-generating faculty), personal (experiential) and factual memory, reasoning and self-consciousness. Human beings have the ability to think of (and imagine) things that lie beyond their present perceptual field – to think of things as encountered in the past and of the encountering of them, of past things learnt about and of the learning of them, of future things that do not yet exist and of eventualities and actions that have not yet occurred or been performed. To the extent that other higher animals possess comparable abilities, then they do so only in rudimentary (pre-linguistic) forms. Humans can think both of what does and also of what does not exist or occur, of what has or has not been done, and of what will and what will not be done. We can believe, imagine, hope or fear that such-and-such is the case, irrespective of whether things are so or not. In short, thought, both in rudimentary form in animals and in developed form in humans, displays intentionality. Not only can we think of and about such things, and think that things are thus-and-so, but we can reason from such premisses to conclusions that follow from or are well supported by them. And we can evaluate such reasoning as valid or invalid, plausible or implausible. Because the horizon of human thinking is so much wider than that of non-human animal thinking, so too the horizon of human feelings and emotions is far wider than that of other animals. Both humans and animals can hope and fear things, but many of the things that humans can hope for (such as salvation, or good weather next week) and fear (such as damnation, or bad weather next week) are not possible objects of corresponding animal emotions.
Like other animals, we are conscious creatures. When conscious (as opposed to being asleep, comatose or anaesthetized), we may be conscious of those items in our perceptual field that catch and hold our attention. Unlike other animals, we are also self-conscious. We have not only the power to move at will and to perceive how things are in our environment, but also the power to be reflectively aware of our doing or having done so. We can not only think and reason, but can further reflect on ourselves as having thought or reasoned thus-and-so. We can not only have reasoned desires in addition to animal appetites, feel emotions and adopt attitudes, deliberate upon goals and purposes, but we can also realize and reflect on such facts. Being self-conscious creatures, we are subject to a variety of emotions of self-assessment, such as pride, shame and guilt, that are foreclosed to non-self-conscious animals (see fig. 1.1).

![Figure 1.1. A possible ordering of human psychological faculties](image-url)

Human beings can reason from given premisses to theoretical or practical conclusions. We can take such-and-such to be a reason for thinking that things are thus-and-so. We can also take things’ being thus-and-so to be a reason for acting or reacting in a certain way. For we do not merely behave and act as our appetites and fancies incline us, we do much of what we do for reasons. We have not only animal desires and passing inclinations, we also have reasoned goals and purposes rooted not merely in our biological make-up, but in reflection on the desirability of objects and objectives relative to our conception of our good and of the good. Rationality is Janus-faced, incorporating both backward- and forward-looking reasons. Inasmuch as we possess an articulate memory, we can take past facts as reasons for present
actions and attitudes – as when we act out of gratitude, punish or reward desert, harbour indignation or resentment, or feel ashamed or guilty. Because we can think about and come to know truths or probabilities concerning the future, we can take future facts or the likelihood of future eventualities as reasons for us to act in certain ways here and now. Our behaviour can accordingly be evaluated as rational or reasonable, as well as irrational or unreasonable. And so too can our emotions and attitudes.

These capacities and their exercise give to human beings the status of persons. While human being is a biological category, person is a moral, legal and social one. To be a person is, among other things, to be a subject of moral rights and duties. It is to be not only an agent, like other animals, but also a moral agent, standing in reciprocal moral relations to others, with a capacity to know and to do good and evil. Since moral agents can act for reasons, and can justify their actions by reference to their reasons, they are also answerable for their deeds. To be a human being is to be a creature whose nature it is to acquire such capacities in the course of normal maturation in a community of like-natured beings.

2. Philosophical anthropology

The above thumbnail sketch in one sense locates human nature in the scheme of things – but the scheme in which it locates it is our conceptual scheme. So much of the sketch is also an indirect description of the network of concepts in terms of which we articulate our nature. It locates the forms of description of human nature in the general conceptual scheme in terms of which we describe all else. The methodical description of the structure of this finely woven network and the examination of some of the ways in which it has been and is commonly misconstrued is the objective of the following studies in philosophical anthropology. This term of art has a wider scope than ‘philosophy of mind’ or ‘philosophical psychology’, although, as I shall use it, it incorporates these. Philosophical anthropology is the investigation of the concepts and forms of explanation characteristic of the study of man. The systematic description of this network of concepts will enable us to shed light on a multitude of philosophical problems and controversies about human nature and the forms of explanation of human behaviour. Prior to commencing the present task,
some methodological reflections are necessary to characterize the task and to defend the methods that will be used.

It would be misguided to suppose that the concepts invoked and their complex relationships are the concepts and conceptual network of a theory of some kind (sometimes referred to contemptuously as ‘folk psychology’) that might be abandoned if the theory were found defective. Theoretical concepts can indeed be jettisoned with the theory to which they belong, if the theory is radically awry. The concepts of phlogiston and caloric are now of mere historical interest. Non-theoretical concepts include the numerous concepts that are employed, *inter alia*, merely to describe phenomena. The phenomena thus described may or may not stand in need of explanation. In some cases, the explanation needed may be theoretical; but not all explanation is theoretical. Non-theoretical concepts do not fall victim to the falsity of an explanation or falsification of an explanatory theory.

The concepts of a human being, of a person, of the mind and body of a person, of the intellect and the will, perception and sensation, knowledge and belief, memory and imagination, thought and reason, desire, intention and will, feelings and emotions, character traits and attitudes, virtues and vices, are not theoretical concepts. They are not concepts that we could abandon after the manner of *phlogiston* or *caloric*. They are used, a-theoretically, to describe phenomena that are the subject matter of numerous theories in the study of human beings, in psychology, anthropology, sociology, history and economics. But that is not their sole role.

These anthropological and psychological concepts do not stand to what they can be used to describe merely as representation to what is represented. For our use of many of these concepts and their congeners itself moulds our nature as human beings, as concept-employing, self-conscious creatures. So their use is partly constitutive of what they can also be invoked to describe. The availability of these concepts gives shape to our subjective experience, for it is by their use, in the first person, that we are able to *give it articulate expression*.

In learning the vocabulary of psychological concepts, a child is not learning a theory of anything. He is, on the one hand, learning *new forms of behaviour* – learning to replace his cries of pain by ‘It hurts’ or ‘I have a pain’ and his cries of indignation with ‘No!’ and ‘I don’t like it’; to herald his deliberate actions by ‘I’m going to’ and later his plans by ‘I intend’, to prefix an ‘I think’ to, or interpolate an ‘I believe’ or an ‘as far as I know’ in, his unconfirmed assertions; and
to preface his fearful but false descriptions on waking from a nightmare with ‘I dreamt’. On the other hand, he is learning to describe other people and to describe and explain their behaviour in these terms. But there is nothing theoretical about describing others as being in pain, listening to this or smelling that, wanting this and thinking that, intending, liking, loving and so forth. The mental is not hidden behind behaviour; but, one might say, metaphorically speaking, that it infuses it. We must not confuse the possibility of not exhibiting or expressing it, or of suppressing its manifestation and concealing it, with the idea that it is unobservable by others. To be sure, this is not to endorse any form of behaviourism. It is often possible not to show that one has a headache; but when one is injured and writhing in agony, one’s pain is patent. That is what is called ‘showing one’s pain’. One can think something to be the case, and not say what one thinks; and it is often possible to keep one’s thoughts to oneself. But when one says what one thinks, one’s thoughts are patent, and when one sincerely confesses one’s thoughts to another, one’s thoughts are laid bare. Nor should we suppose that the mental is observable by the subject, as if one enjoyed privileged access to one’s ‘domain of consciousness’. There is such a thing as introspection, but it is not a kind of inner perception – it is a form of self-reflection. Such confusions and suppositions concerning psychological concepts incorporate deep and ramifying errors which infect empirical sciences of man, such as psychology and cognitive neuroscience.

Furthermore, the characteristic forms of explanation of human behaviour in terms of reasons are not to be found in the natural sciences and are not proto-scientific explanations. Teleology is, to be sure, also appropriately invoked in the study of non-human, biological phenomena. So too are the concepts of goal, purpose and function. But explanation in terms of reasons and motives is distinctive of human behaviour. This too is not part of a proto-science, although it is true that these forms of explanation characterize the study of man in history, psychology and the social sciences. But, like the psychological and anthropological concepts that are involved in such explanations, the explanations themselves are typically partly constitutive of the phenomena that they explain. To learn, as every human being does, to give such explanations at the homely level of personal action and relations is not to learn the rudiments of a science. It is to learn to be a rational human being and to participate in the human form of life that is the birthright and burden of the children of Adam.
3. Grammatical investigation

So, the theme of the following philosophical investigations is human nature. But it is simultaneously the grammar of the description of what is distinctively human. And it is the former because it is the latter. For the investigations are purely conceptual. They explore the concepts and conceptual forms we employ in our thought and talk about ourselves, and examine the logico-grammatical relationships between these concepts and conceptual forms.

The study of the nature of things, in one sense, belongs to the empirical sciences. It is the task of physics, chemistry and biology, of psychology, economics and sociology to discover the properties and relations, the regularities and laws, of the objects that fall within their domain. Empirical observation leads to explanatory theory, commonly with predictive and retrodictive power. Theories involve abstraction and generalization from observed data, and the confirmation or infirmation of conjectures in experience. The truths discovered are empirical truths, and the theories confirmed are empirical theories.

The study of the nature of things, in another sense, belongs to philosophy. This investigation has sometimes been characterized as the quest for the essential nature of things, and contrasted with the empirical sciences that are conceived to study their contingent nature. In past ages such investigation was allocated to the Queen of the Sciences – metaphysics. The de re essences of things provided the subject matter of metaphysical philosophy, and their disclosure its sublime task.¹ This, however, was an illusion. There is no such thing as metaphysics thus conceived, and no such subject matter for philosophy to investigate.

It is one thing to grant that substances of a given kind have essential as well as accidental properties, or that the instantiation of certain properties or relations entails the instantiation or exclusion of certain other properties and relations. It is quite another to hold that propositions that state the essential properties of a given substance or the relations of inclusion or exclusion that hold between properties and relations describe mind-independent, language-independent, metaphysical necessities in reality. What appear here to be descriptions of de re necessities are actually norms of representation. That

¹ A conception taken up again at the end of the nineteenth century by Husserl and the Munich circle of phenomenologists, who abandoned psychologism for a quest for Wesensschau.
is, they are not descriptions of how things are, but implicit *prescriptions* (rules) for describing how things are. Consider the following four propositions:

(i) A material object is a three-dimensional space-occupying entity that can be in motion or at rest and consists of matter of one kind or another.

(ii) Every event is temporally related to every other event.

(iii) Nothing can simultaneously be red all over and also green all over.

(iv) Every rod has a length.

Such propositions appear to be descriptions. They are what we think of as *necessary truths*, for, to be sure, nothing can be a material object that is not a space-occupant or that does not consist of material stuff; it is inconceivable that there be an event that is neither earlier nor later nor yet simultaneous with, or a constituent phase of, any other event, or that something be both red all over and green all over simultaneously; and it is not a contingent matter that we shall never find a rod without a length.

Appearances are deceptive. These sentences express *rules* for the use of their constituent terms *in the guise of descriptions*. If we characterize something as a material object, then it follows without more ado that we may characterize it as a space-occupant made of matter of some kind. We do not have to check to see whether perhaps *this* material object is *not* made of some matter or other, or whether it may have *no* spatial location. These *internal* (defining) properties and relations are *constitutive* of what it is to be a material thing: they are part of what we mean by ‘material object’. If reference is made to some event, we can infer without more ado that it is either earlier than, later than, simultaneous with, or a constitutive phase of any other event. If something is described as being red all over, it follows that it is not also green all over – this is not something that we need to confirm by looking. And if something is said to be a rod, it follows that it can be described as having a certain length. What appear to be descriptions of *meta*-physical necessities in nature are norms (rules) for describing natural phenomena. We would not *call* something a material object if it occupied no space or did not consist of matter; we would not *deem* something to be a genuine event if it were not simultaneous with, earlier or later than, or a phase of, any other given event; we would not *describe* something as being red
all over if we were willing to describe it as green all over; and we
would not hold something that lacked a length to be a rod. These are
not discoveries about things, but the commitments consequent on
employing a certain form of representation or description.

While the truth of an empirical proposition excludes a possibility,
the truth of such necessitarian propositions as that nothing can be
red and green all over, or that there cannot be a rod without a length,
or that every material object must be located somewhere, somewhen,
does not. A logical or conceptual impossibility is not a possibility that
is impossible. So what is excluded is not a possibility that has been
described by a form of words, but only the form of words that appears
to describe a possibility. And the form of words is excluded as sense-
less, inasmuch as it describes neither a logical possibility nor a logical
impossibility. For there is no such thing as describing a logical impossible,
*since there is nothing to describe*. So what we are doing is *in effect*
excluding a form of words from the language inasmuch as it
lacks sense.² It makes no sense to say that something is both red and
green all over, or that there is a rod with no length; that is, to utter
the words ‘A is both red all over and green all over’ or ‘A is a rod
but it has no length’ is not to say anything intelligible, but to utter
a kind of nonsense. What appear to be necessary truths about the
world – for example, that nothing can be red and green all over
simultaneously, or that every rod must have a length – are actually
no more than *grammatical propositions* that are implicitly about
the use of words. These ‘can-s’ and ‘must-s’ are marks of norms of
representation.

To use the term ‘grammar’ to refer to any sense- or meaning-
determining rules for the use of words is a harmless Wittgensteinian
extension of the grammarians’ use of the word. I shall follow Wittgen-
stein’s usage and apply the term ‘grammar’ and its cognates to rules
that are not merely syntactical.³ In this extended use, apparently meta-
physical propositions about *de re* necessities are merely *grammatical
propositions* – that is, propositions about the usage of expressions

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² This does not mean that it cannot occur in indirect speech to report someone’s
words. What it does mean is that if someone is reported as having spoken thus, we
know that what he said was a form of nonsense.

³ The grammarian will say that the rule that ‘identical’ cannot form a comparat-
ive or superlative is a grammatical one, but that the rule that excludes prefixing the
phrase ‘north-east of’ to ‘the North Pole’ or to ‘the South Pole’ is not. For our pur-
poses this distinction is unnecessary.
in the form of descriptions of the properties and relations of things. So too, the description of the essential properties and relations of some thing (an F) is a specification of the grammar of ‘F’. For it will specify the properties and relations of an F, the loss of which will be tantamount to the destruction of an F or to its degeneration (to its constituting a borderline or limiting case of being an F). Something that lacked these-and-these properties, or did not stand in such-and-such relations, would not be called ‘an F’ (unless we changed the meaning of the word ‘F’). Since such propositions are commonly not especially concerned with the language in which they are expressed, but apply equally to any language that contains expressions used in the relevantly same way, they are also commonly and correctly said to express conceptual truths. So ‘Red is darker than pink’ is a grammatical proposition that in effect says that anything that can truly be said to be red can also truly be said to be darker than anything that can be said to be pink, and it characterizes the concepts of being red, pink and darker than (and not only the English words).

However, it would be mistaken to suppose that any clarification of the nature, as opposed to the essence, of an F must adduce characteristic marks of the concept of F – that is, conditions necessary and sufficient for being an F (for the application of the expression ‘an F’). For the concept may not be so moulded, and the clarification of what it is to be an F may proceed differently; for there are many different ways of explaining what ‘F’ or ‘an F’ means. Some expressions are explained by specification of criteria (i.e. logically good evidence, as opposed to inductive evidence) for their application. Others may be explained by ostensive definition by reference to a sample, as when we point at a certain thing and say, ‘That (colour) is Brunswick green’ or ‘That (length) is one metre’ or ‘That (animal) is an elephant’. Some expressions are typically explained by enumeration of examples together with a similarity rider: so, if asked what a game is (what the word ‘game’ means), one might reply that football, bridge, chess, hide-and-seek and suchlike are games. Such expressions, following Wittgenstein, are held to express ‘family-resemblance concepts’. And other forms of explanation are licit too. It should be noted that different forms of explanation are not necessarily exclusive: that is, some expressions may be explained correctly in more than one way.

The philosophical study of human nature, by contrast with psychological, social-scientific and neuroscientific studies, is grammatical or conceptual. Philosophical anthropology, as I am using the term, is an investigation into the conceptual scheme in terms of which we
describe ourselves and our complex moral and social relationships, give expression to our inner life, explain, justify or excuse the thoughts, feelings and actions of human beings. Its product will directly or indirectly be a description of a web of words and the delineation of their forms of connectedness, as well as a characterization of forms of explanation appropriate to and distinctive of the domain. It will not, however, produce a theory of human nature.

This book, *Human Nature: The Categorial Framework*, investigates the fundamental categories in terms of which we think about ourselves: the two related categories of substance (for we are a substance of a certain kind, and are made of substances of various kinds); the category of causation (for we are creatures with causal powers to effect changes to things in the world around us, and causal susceptibilities to be affected by them); the category of power (for we have a wide range of different kinds of active and passive powers); the category of agency (for we are agents with the ability to act or refrain from acting, and to act on things around us). These categorial themes are commonly deemed metaphysical. If by ‘metaphysics’ one means not a study of the *de re* ‘essence of the world’ – its allegedly language-independent necessary features – but rather an investigation into the most general structural concepts that inform our thought, then so indeed they are. In this sense our investigation can be deemed metaphysical.

Having clarified these very general conceptual forms, I shall then turn to investigate the distinctive forms of understanding and explanation that characterize our thought and talk about ourselves – the various forms of teleological and reason-giving explanation. This elucidation of the categorial framework is preparatory to an investigation of the concepts of the body and the mind that human beings are said to have, and of the relationship between being a human being and being a person.

4. Philosophical investigation

It is not the task of philosophy to compete with the psychological or neuropsychological sciences. It is not its business to come up with empirical theories and conjectures that stand in need of experimental confirmation. That is the business of the empirical sciences. It is not the task of philosophy to produce non-empirical theories either – for there are no such things for philosophy to produce. What would a non-empirical philosophical theory look like? And how might it
be confirmed or disconfirmed? What the non-empirical sciences of arithmetic, geometry and formal logic can do is produce concepts and conceptual relationships for the empirical sciences to deploy in their theories and reasoning about phenomena. These mathematical and logical tasks are concept formation by proof construction and determination of formal canons of validity. To be sure, the term ‘theory’ is used in this domain. Mathematicians speak of the mathematical theory of functions, for example, and logicians speak of quantification theory. But this invokes the term ‘theory’ in a quite different sense from that which it has when we speak of empirical theories in the natural sciences. The concepts formed by the mathematical sciences have their primary use, directly or indirectly, in the transformation of empirical propositions concerning magnitudes and quantifiable attributes of things and in the transformation of descriptions of spatial relations between things, and so forth. But the task of philosophy is not to generate novel concepts and conceptual connections for use in the empirical sciences or for use in everyday discourse. Rather, it is to clarify existing concepts and conceptual connections and to discern the very general patterns they exhibit. To be sure, this does not imply that in the course of fulfilling that task and ordering the concepts it investigates with the aim of obviating confusions, philosophy may not introduce new distinctions among concepts or classes of concepts, or between different kinds of proposition for purposes of philosophical illumination.

Philosophy is, of course, a theoretical, not a practical, activity. But there is nothing hypothetico-deductive or predictive, on the model of theories of natural science, about its methods or results. Nor is there any novel concept formation for the purposes of the natural sciences, on the model of many theories in mathematics. But this does not mean that philosophy is not, or cannot be, systematic. Nor does it mean that it cannot aspire to whatever degree of generality its conceptual elucidations admit of.

The motivation for philosophical concept clarification may be twofold. First, especially when operating at a high level of generality, there is an intrinsic interest in detecting the most general structural features of our thought. For the ways in which we think about ourselves and our fellow human beings, the concepts we use in expressing or reporting our inner lives and describing those of others, and the distinctive forms we invoke in explaining our own behaviour and that of others, have very general structural features of which we are not
ordinarily aware. Indeed, there is no reason why we should be, since the realization of affinities and differences, analogies and disanalogies, between different concepts and concept types is not a condition for mastering the uses of those concepts. But achieving an understanding of such general structural features is simultaneously achieving a certain kind of understanding of human nature. For what we come to understand are the forms of our understanding of ourselves.

Secondly, the psychological and anthropological concepts and forms of explanation with which we are concerned are the source of deep, widespread and perennial conceptual confusions. Although the concepts are ordinary, everyday ones, which we employ unthinkingly and correctly in the stream of our lives, reflection upon them generates puzzlement. Although the forms of explanation are altogether familiar, and constantly invoked in our daily discourse, they are subject to widespread misconstrual in philosophy, in the human sciences, and in cognitive science and neuroscience, being typically viewed as epiphenomenal, or forms of causal explanation, and so no different in principle from the forms of explanation characteristic of the sciences, or as reducible to such forms.

Many of the most general and problematic concepts, such as mind, soul, body, self, person, were moulded by, and in some cases generated in the course of, centuries of Greek, Jewish and Christian philosophico-theological reflections in the ancient and early modern world. Some of the resultant misconceptions still cling to our thought about what they signify. The employment of many psychological concepts in the human and zoological sciences is characteristically confused and riven with misconceived scientific theory, precipitously hypothesized without the conceptual clarification that should precede theory construction. So misconceptions and incoherences are masked under the rubrics of theological doctrine and its vulgarization in the understanding of religious believers, on the one hand, and scientific as well as pseudo-scientific theories of psychology, of the mind and the brain, on the other. For the puzzlements often masquerade as mysteries, which, it is alleged, it is not given to man to comprehend, or as forms of empirical ignorance, which will allegedly be solved by the march of science. Whereas in fact the puzzlements and apparent mysteries are knots that we have tied in our understanding. The disentangling of such knots and the explanation of how we tied them and why they hold us captive are primary goals and a full justification for the activity of philosophical clarification. What are clarified are concepts and forms of explanation. What the clarification aims to
achieve is the dissolution of misconceptions about our nature and the attainment of a correct conception. The method of clarification is primarily, though not exclusively, an examination of the uses of words and patterns of reasoning.

5. Philosophy and ‘mere words’

Is a philosophical inquiry into human nature, then, primarily lexicographical? Is it just a matter of language? Surely we are interested in the nature of mankind, not in mere words! To suggest otherwise seems repulsive – a trivialization of a profoundly important subject. It is inappropriate to denigrate such an interest in words. We do not condemn the investigations of theoretical linguists as trivial because they are concerned with ‘mere words’. Why should a corresponding philosophical concern seem of lesser importance? A philosophical interest in language is anything but trivial. Of course, it differs from the grammarian’s. The questions that engage our attention are of no concern to linguists. But it is possible to be interested in language and word usage for many different reasons. Even philosophy of language is not a branch of linguistics, although it focuses upon such linguistic concepts as name, referring expression, predicate, quantifier, sentence, logical connective. Philosophical anthropology and philosophy of mind are obviously not branches of linguistics either; but they too are concerned with the elucidation of a segment of language – with the anthropological and psychological vocabulary.

Philosophical elucidation of a segment of language, however, is not a form of glorified lexicography. We do not need to engage in socio-linguistic surveys to establish how the expressions that concern us are used. Being competent speakers of the language, we know perfectly well how to use the relevant expressions, and at most need to be reminded of the familiar. We may take usage (ordinary or technical, as the case may be) for granted, just as the competent chess-player may take the moves of the game for granted, and the competent mathematician may take the use of numerals for granted. But we may not have realized similarities between different kinds of expression and differences between apparently similar kinds of expression. Such failures of realization may be a source of far-reaching conceptual bafflement and error. We commonly construe substantives on the model of names of substances, and run into dire confusion over ‘mind’, ‘self’ or ‘substance’. We typically construe verbs on the model of names