Critical Humanist Perspectives
The Integrational Turn in Philosophy of Language and Communication

Edited by
Adrian Pablé
The present book is a collection of scholarly reflections on the theme of humanism from an integrational linguistic perspective. It studies humanist thought in relation to the philosophy of language and communication underpinning it and considers the question whether being a ‘humanist’ binds one to a particular view of language. The contributions to this volume explore whether integrational linguistics, being informed by a non-mainstream semiology and adopting a lay linguistic perspective, can provide better answers to contentious ontological and epistemological questions concerning the humanist project – questions having to do with the self, reason, authenticity, creativity, free agency, knowledge and human communication. The humanist perspectives adopted by the contributors to this volume are critical insofar as they start from semiological assumptions that challenge received notions within mainstream linguistics, such as the belief that languages are fixed-codes of some kind, that communication serves the purpose of thought transfer, and that languages are prerequisites for communication.

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   Hayley G. Davis

2 The Language Myth in Western Culture
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3 Rethinking Linguistics
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4 The Written Language Bias in Linguistics
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   Per Linell

5 Language and History
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In June 2014, the International Association for the Integrational Study of Language and Communication (IAISLC) held a conference titled Integrationism & Humanism. The event took place in the pre-Alpine resort of Oberägeri, Switzerland, and brought together scholars from all over the world to discuss the ideas of Prof. Roy Harris and the future of integrational linguistics (of which he was the founder). The present volume is only a partial record of that Swiss conference: Although some of the contributions to this volume are rewritings of the actual conference papers, some contributors preferred to submit a different – though still thematically pertinent – paper than the one originally presented. A small number of chapters in this collection were written by scholars who were not present at the conference but whose views add intellectual depth to this collection. Moreover, not every item on the conference agenda is represented here. One item deserving particular mention is Roy Harris’s paper titled ‘Integrationism & Existentialism’, which had to be read in absentia because of his precarious health condition. Prof. Harris passed away in February 2015. This volume is dedicated to his memory.

My special thanks go to my colleagues Jon Orman and Chris Hutton for their help and advice in connection with this volume but also for many invaluable discussions about integrational semiology. I am also grateful to Paul J. Thibault and Peter E. Jones for their constructive help in finding the right title for this book. I wish to express a special word of gratitude to Paul Cobley for agreeing to write the Afterword, providing the present collection of chapters with an important meta-commentary. Lastly, I would like to thank Christina Low and Samantha Phua from Routledge, whose advice and support have been crucial to this project.

Adrian Pablé
Part I
1 Introduction

Humanism, existentialism and integrational semiology

Adrian Pablé

In a chapter devoted to ‘Rules and Regularities’ from his final book *Language & Intelligence*, Roy Harris remarks, *en passant*, that

philosophically, integrationism is a form of existentialism. More exactly, it is a form of humanism in the Sartrian sense.

(Harris 2013a: 56)

Harris’s readers are offered no additional explanations as to what a ‘Sartrian humanism’ consists in; instead he or she is referred to Jean-Paul Sartre’s essay *Existentialism & Humanism* (Sartre [1946]1948), originally delivered as a lecture at the Parisian Club Maintenant. I assume I wasn’t the only one to be intrigued by this comparison: I had never thought of the integrationist as an existentialist, nor was I aware that Harris ever mentioned Sartre before in any of his publications. When and how Harris realised that there was a connection we do not know and perhaps never will. The cited passage is followed by the statement that ‘it [integrationism?] assumes that human beings alone are responsible for what they are and do’, which Harris goes on to connect to the actual topic of the chapter: ‘In this perspective, rules are man-made instructions’. Harris’s digression prompted me to read Sartre’s essay. It became fairly clear to me how his semiological views could appeal to an integrationist. Most important, Sartre recognises that we are sign-makers and responsible for the signs we make. Like Harris, Sartre denies that rules have an independent existence; rather, they have to be interpreted by an interpreter

You are free, therefore choose, that is to say, invent. No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do: no signs are vouchsafed in this world. [. . .] it is I myself, in every case, who have to interpret the signs.

(Sartre 1948: 38)

In terms of his ‘existentialist humanism’, Sartre rejects the idea of ‘a cult of humanity’, that is, a humanism that ‘upholds man as the end-in-itself and as the supreme value’ (1948: 54). Sartre goes on to state that this kind of false
humanism, which he regards as ‘absurd’, assumes ‘that we can ascribe value to man according to the most distinguished deeds of certain men’ (1948: 55):

It is not admissible that a man should pronounce judgment upon Man. Existentialism dispenses with any judgment of this sort: an existentialist will never take man as the end, since man is still to be determined.

(Sartre 1948: 55)

His philosophy is ‘humanistic’ in a different sense, Sartre tells us. For Sartre, ‘there is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity’ (1948: 55). It seems to me that the latter position comes close to a Harrisian position on ‘reality’; in other words, there is no other view for humans than a human view, which Harris accounts for on biomechanical grounds. In Integrationist Notes and Papers no. 14 (2006), Harris discusses the concept of ‘units’ and why units are part of the human universe – in fact, why they are the result of contextually integrated activities:

Staring hard at nature’s apple-tree does not tell us whether the apple is a Natural unit. But once Adam and Eve start deliberately picking apples in order to eat them, they make them units, regardless of whether Nature approves or not. Given the biomechanical limitations of the human hand and the human mouth, they could hardly do otherwise. But the blackbird in the Garden of Eden who also treats the apple-tree as a source of food is under no such compulsion. His feeding techniques have different biomechanical parameters: the way he treats the problem is more like the way Adam might treat it if the apple were as big as Adam and much heavier, and Adam had no hands and arms. And if that were the case, Adam would doubtless look at apples in a quite different way. Whether each apple would still be a unit of some kind for Adam is not at all clear.

(Harris 2006: 65)

We can only surmise what it would be like for human beings in general to be biomechanically constrained the way a blackbird is (e.g. no hands or arms) and how our habits of abstraction would differ as a consequence of that. Elsewhere, in fact, Harris (2005: 112–113) proposes that counting originated in integrated and interactionally achieved activities involving the participants’ hands and fingers, as opposed to a purely intellectual achievement requiring pre-existing number-words. Would the human universe be populated with numbers if the first man had been arm- and handless? The much-cherished notion (within the philosophy of mind) of ‘what it is like’ has been taken up again in later works by Harris, for example, in Mindboggling (2008) and in Integrationist Notes and Papers no. 58 (2014), in which Harris reexamines Thomas Nagel’s controversial paper ‘What Is it Like to be a Bat?’, which, Harris tells us, ‘has the rare distinction of being a philosophical discussion devoted to a question that its author admits is nonsensical’ (Harris 2014: 55):
The choice of the *what is it like?* formula encourages Nagel’s readers to assume that the underlying issue [. . .] is how far we can imagine what a bat’s life is like, i.e. within the limits of our non-bat-like imagination. What fascinates Nagel [. . .] is how far the human imagination is limited by the physical properties of the human form. To what extent can we extrapolate from our own physical being to put ourselves in the make-believe position of quite different creatures? Can we imagine spending a great deal of time hanging up-side-down, or finding our way about by echo-location? Or do we deceive ourselves into thinking that we can imagine it?

(Harris 2014: 56–57)

Harris agrees with philosopher of science John Dupré, who states: ‘from the possibility of saying what it is like to have particular experiences, we conclude that there is something this is like’ (Harris 2014: 56). In other words, what happens, according to Harris, is the *reification* of ‘what it is like’. Harris concedes that one may well be able to understand *what it is* to hang upside down, as bats do, as we can try doing this ourselves, but

the issue is whether that understanding enables you to adopt the perspective of an unintelligent creature who, quite unlike you, perforce spends a great deal of time hanging upside-down. The most plausible answer is ‘No’, because merely hanging habitually upside-down does not enable a creature to appreciate how its life compares with that of any of the many species whose posture is habitually upright.

(Harris 2014: 56–57)

Harris shares with Sartre an interest in how ‘man can realize himself as truly human’ (Sartre 1948: 56). For Harris, this question is intimately bound to his quest for self-understanding and self-knowledge. However, is this knowledge and this understanding strictly knowledge and understanding of oneself or also of others? Which knowledge comes first, if at all? Sartre makes it absolutely clear that you cannot have any knowledge of yourself without the other, which amounts to a clear denial of solipsism:

the subjectivity which we thus postulate as the standard of truth is no narrowly individual subjectivism, for as we have demonstrated, it is not only one’s own self that one discovers in the *cogito*, but those of others too. Contrary to the philosophy of Descartes, contrary to that of Kant, when we say “I think” we are attaining to ourselves in the presence of the other, and we are just as certain of the other as we are of ourselves. Thus the man who discovers himself directly in the *cogito* also discovers all the others, and discovers them as the condition of his own existence. He recognises that he cannot be anything [. . .] unless others recognise him as such. I cannot obtain any truth whatsoever about myself, except through the mediation of another. The other is indispensable to my existence, and equally
so to any knowledge I can have of myself. Under these conditions, the intimate discovery of myself is at the same time the revelation of the other [. . .] Thus, at once, we find ourselves in a world which is, let us say, that of “inter-subjectivity”.

(Sartre 1948: 45)

On that score, it is worth mentioning a passage in Integrationist Notes and Papers no. 48 (2013b), in which Harris disavows that integrationists subscribe to a form of solipsism:

A solipsist believes that there is nothing else but the content of his or her own mind. An integrationist, on the contrary, believes that there are other minds, with whose owners he or she can engage in communication.

(Harris 2013b: 36)

In the final chapter of Mindboggling (Harris 2008), Harris tells the reader that he believes he has a mind. He argues that this insight leads him to suppose that other people have minds, too. Harris would probably agree with Sartre when the latter says that ‘the intimate discovery of myself is at the same time the revelation of the other’ (Sartre 1948: 45). But the Harrisian starting point is always the self, never the other.

‘Do I have a mind?’ First of all, is the question worth asking? Certainly, because refusing to address it would be tantamount to evading any responsibility for self-understanding. And should the answer be ‘no’ in my own case, I will have no reason for supposing that anyone else has a mind either. That would be to take a very gloomy view of humanity.

(Harris 2008: 155)

Engaging in communication with others amounts to each party ‘exercising his or her own mind’, as Harris (2008: 159) tells us, and thereby – hopefully – entering into a dialogue. Crucially, communication is not about either party gaining access to the other party’s mind. For the integrationist, what one knows about oneself is very different from what one knows about others, and the difference between self-knowledge and knowledge of others is accountable on experiential grounds. Resuming the discourse around the notion of ‘what it is like’, Harris remarks in Integrationist Notes and Papers no. 33:

If you are asked ‘what it is like’ to live in London, you may well, having lived in London, be able to give some account. But presumably, ‘what it is like’ to live in London is different for different Londoners. They may all be individually said to know ‘what it is like’, without having any experience in common. What they have in common, which qualifies them to say ‘what it is like’, is simply the geographical fact of living in London.

(Harris 2011: 80)
Of course, what others say that it is like (e.g. to live in London) can become part of my knowledge of what it is like to live in London, but there is a qualitative difference in terms of experience, which is to say that there are different forms of integration involved. My experience is not merely ‘discursive’ or ‘narrative’. I can certainly relate other people’s experience to my own, even ‘making it my own’ in some sense. On that score, Sartre is right to point out that one’s own mind and other people’s minds cannot be separated – we are social beings after all. But crucially, I can discern my own self from other people’s selves. People who are unable to do so find themselves, to borrow a Harrisian phrase, ‘in a state of dis-integration’ (1998: 29).

***

Thus, on the one hand, I was intrigued by a possible connection between integrationism and existentialism and how these two philosophies approach the human, the self and knowledge. On the other hand, I had never thought of integrationism as a form of humanism. Tony Davies, in a revised second edition of his book *Humanism* (Davies 2008), does not mention Harris (or an integrationist strand of humanism), though he mentions Sartre. If indeed integrationism is a form of humanism, as Harris claims, then certainly integrationists could (and should) take part in current humanist debates, making clear how, if at all, an integrationist humanism differs from other (currently – or historically – fashionable) humanistic schools. Surely, many of the core humanist assumptions, emphasizing the autonomy and integrity of the individual, free agency, authenticity, creativity, the conscious self, and independence of thought, resonate with the integrationist, but the crucial question motivating the conference at the time as well as the present book is the following: Do integrationists and humanists share the same philosophy of language? The same sign theory? It is perhaps less surprising to be told that structuralism is an ‘anti-humanist’ movement, and that, as a consequence, humanism and anti-humanism are founded on mutually exclusive sign theories. As Tony Davies notes,

> structuralism kicks away the twin pillars of humanism: the sovereignty of rational consciousness, and the authenticity of individual speech. I do not think, I am thought. You do not speak, you are spoken. Thought and speech, which for the humanist had been the central substance of identity, are located elsewhere, and the self is a vacancy.  

(Davies 2008: 57)

The question whether an integrationist humanism differs, in its semiology, from other historical and current forms of humanism might first appear as a mere quibble. What counts is that humanists *in toto* share the same interests and core values: possible differences when it comes to respective philosophies of language and communication will not change the fact that any humanist is ultimately interested in tackling the question of ‘the human’ from what Matthew Arnold
called ‘the central, truly human point of view’. However, for the integrationist, ‘the central, truly human point of view’ has to start with a self-understanding rather than an essentialistic picture of ‘Man’ – an approach taken by current brands of secular humanism; moreover, language and communication are central to the integrational line of inquiry, while an existentalist, or Sartrian, anti-essentialism might not be an adequate answer to secular humanist views, the former being too strongly associated with a literary movement and political activism. Integrationism, as a perhaps more ‘neutral’ academic discipline, might be in a better position to challenge certain humanist assumptions. And this is what the present book sets out to do.

The purpose of this book is not to provide a manifesto for an integrationist humanism – there is no consensus among integrationists what the integrationist qua humanist believes and what ideas she or he rejects. Rather, this book offers a platform for presenting a variety of – sometimes conflicting – viewpoints on key humanist topics (i.e. the self, agency, creativity, freedom, self-determination and knowledge), as well as for discussing issues central to humanist enquiries, such as human reason, logic, meaning, communication and the forces that (are said to) govern them. What unites the contributors to this collection are certain core beliefs of a semiological kind inspired by the work of Roy Harris, among which the notion that all signs (including linguistic signs) are ‘made’, that is, they are the products of contextually integrated activities carried out by individuals – individuals who communicate and whose lives are made possible by communication. In other words, the insight that humans integrate (and that, crucially, they do so in species-specific ways). Anyone adopting a Harrisian semiology will have to concede at least this: There can be no understanding of ‘the human’ without a proper understanding of human communication. For the integrationist, any book devoted to humanism has to address the question of communication, which is – to a considerable extent – a semiological question. The humanist perspectives adopted by the contributors to this volume are critical insofar as they start from semiological assumptions that challenge received notions within orthodox linguistics, such as the idea that languages are fixed codes of some kind, that communication serves the purpose of thought transfer and that languages are prerequisites for communication. How consequential these language-philosophical beliefs are when it comes to the humanist project of knowing and understanding ourselves better is up to each one of us, including the present contributors, to critically explore.

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