



HUMAN MINDS

An Exploration

‘Refreshingly different ... the way we understand
how we learn to think might never look the same again’

– *The New York Times Book Review*

MARGARET
DONALDSON

Author of *Children's Minds*



MARGARET DONALDSON

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AN EXPLORATION



PENGUIN BOOKS

In memory of my mother
Nan Lennox Donaldson
for the childhood she gave me

PENGUIN BOOKS

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PENGUIN BOOKS
HUMAN MINDS

'*Human Minds* belongs on the same shelf as Daniel Dennett's
Consciousness Explained ... A heartfelt book,
full of interesting insights' – Will Self in the *Independent*

'In this thoughtful and evocative book Margaret Donaldson
shows that academic psychology is not "merely" academic. She
applies fascinating new discoveries on the growing awareness of
the world in babies and children to how adults can discover
themselves, and how to live more effectively and with greater
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'The theory is really impressive ... Donaldson writes
persuasively and shows a deep knowledge of research on
children's intellectual and emotional development' –
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Donaldson is Emeritus Professor of Developmental Psychology at the University of Edinburgh. Her previous publications include *A Study of Children's Thinking* (1963) and *Children's Minds* (1978). She also writes for children.

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Preface

It is an interesting experience, if at first a disconcerting one, to follow a line of argument starting from familiar ideas and then to find oneself moving in an unexpected direction towards outcomes not foreseen.

The origins of this book lie in some unanswered questions which stayed with me after I had written *Children's Minds*. Its conclusions were to me like signposts pointing beyond themselves, and after a time the urge to find out what was there became compelling. However, when I first tried to do this I believed that I knew what the general lie of the land would be. And I thought that a resting-place in the shape of further conclusions would not be too hard to reach. I turned out to be wrong. The exploration that resulted has taken me a long time and has led me far from the kind of territory which I knew well.

At one stage a perceptive critic who had been kind enough to read a draft wrote as follows, thinking of the journey as a maritime one: 'I feel you are sailing into such dangerous waters that I would be letting you down badly if I didn't stand on the bank waving and shouting and trying to get you to steer another course.' I smiled at the image and at the same time took him seriously. But what other course? There seemed to be no other course open to me except to turn back and abandon the enterprise. This I did not feel able to do.

What chiefly worried my critic was the move that takes place in the middle of the book from psychological to historical discussion. I reached the conclusion, however, that the recourse to both psychology and history was necessary if I was not to dodge some of the most important topics to which the developing arguments had brought me. I knew very well that this move was risky. I felt

exposed and vulnerable, as those who cross disciplinary boundaries must always do if they face the extent of their liability to error. However, fear of error ought not to induce paralysis. Also it is worth remembering that we are not immune from mistakes within the disciplines that we call our own. It is even arguable that these mistakes are the more dangerous kind since they bear the stamp of some sort of authority. This by itself means that they tend to be more deeply rooted. They are usually entangled with our self-esteem and it is hard to pull them out.

I did, of course, take historical advice, and I was fortunate enough to have Rosalind Mitchison's scholarly comments available to me. I hope I used them well. I certainly enjoyed my talks with her and gained much from them. I am most grateful for her guidance.

As the arguments in the book evolved it was not only in the direction of history that I had to cross boundaries. It also came to seem necessary to write about certain aspects of religion – and now I was even more acutely aware of needing help. I received this generously from John McIntyre. To have the benefit of his wide understanding of theology, of philosophy and indeed of psychology was a reassurance and a privilege.

In the specific matter of Buddhism I had further assistance from two people with particular knowledge of that religion: Rod Burstall and Tom Thorpe. Both made comments which I found illuminating, and which certainly enabled me to improve what I had written. I do still have to acknowledge that my discussion of Buddhism is inescapably that of an outsider with an unusual point of view. But I write with respect, and with appreciation of what I have personally gained from my studies of Buddhist teachings and from the guidance of these two friends.

I also needed, and was generously given, help from within my own discipline. I am grateful to Jerome Bruner for important advice, which I took as far as I felt able. But some of his thoughts raised major questions that went beyond my scope here. Perhaps they will come to serve as a new set of signposts.

Jess Reid, Alison Elliot and Morag Donaldson kept up their support over a period of years, patiently reading one section after

another with remarkable fortitude, writing criticisms and discussing ideas with me at length. I owe a great debt to them. Valuable support of a different kind, also sustained over a long time, came from Shimon Abramovici and Tony Fallone, who greatly assisted me with library research.

As the work came nearer to a conclusion I was fortunate to have comments from David Bloor, Robin Campbell, Kath Davies, Tony Fallone, Barbara Gardiner, Robert Grieve, Paul Harris, David Hay, Lynne Murray, Chris Pratt, Martin Hughes, Janet Simpson, Jane Turnbull, Colwyn Trevarthen and Jennifer Wishart. They showed me many possibilities of improvement and I am grateful to them all.

I want also to thank my agent, Caradoc King, whose enthusiasm for the book was a great encouragement to me, and my editors, Jon Riley in London and Dawn Seferian in New York, for important suggestions and much considerate support.

Marcia Wright, Avril Davies and Rosemary Teacher typed most of the manuscript, and it was often not easy to decipher. I appreciate their patience, skill and care.

It is a convention that one's spouse should be thanked last. My husband, Stephen Salter, has certainly earned this distinction. He is the only person, so far as I know, who has gone through the whole book from back to front. This is not as absurd as it sounds. He had offered to put a large number of revisions on to a disk for me and he started at the end so that the insertion of one change would not affect the page number of the next. This made the task easier but still it was unavoidably boring and long. I am very grateful to him for undertaking this considerable chore.

Beyond this, however, I thank him for a more sustained contribution: his steady support for the whole enterprise, even when the goal seemed to be receding instead of drawing nearer. He is a man who understands absorption and commitment and who knows well that, while ideas can appear in a flash, the working out of their implications may take a very long time.

Edinburgh
January 1992

PART ONE

DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDHOOD

I

Modes of Mind: An Introduction

Some years ago a man in the United States managed to put one hundred rattlesnakes into a bag in twenty-eight seconds. It was a record at the time. Most likely it has been surpassed already. The man's behaviour was odd, deviant even. Most of us do not go around putting rattlesnakes into bags for the sole purpose of showing how good we are at doing it. Yet this strange act reveals something fundamental about human nature. In spite of its oddity, it illustrates an attribute that we all share.

Many suggestions have been made about the qualities that mark us out as a species. Among the candidates have been ability to use language, skill in opposing thumb and forefinger for the highly controlled use of a tool, knowledge of good and evil – and so on in some variety, so that there is clearly no point in trying to find *the* one. But the man with the rattlesnakes demonstrates a characteristic that is crucial for an understanding of the human species: he illustrates our remarkable capacity for forming novel kinds of purpose. One of the most striking things about us is that we are highly prolific 'intention generators'. We set goals for ourselves of the most diverse kinds. One person forms the purpose of driving people into gas ovens. Another forms the purpose of rescuing abandoned children from the streets of Calcutta. Both are human beings.

However, this diversity does not mean that we have no goals in common. There are some kinds of general purpose that are extremely pervasive among us – universal indeed, except in certain pathological conditions – such as the goal of understanding or making sense of things and the goal of communicating with one another.

Also, of course, we share with the other animals certain physiological urges which we experience as hunger, sexual desire, and so on. However, it is characteristic of us that we are capable of transcending these urges, though not easily. We may set ourselves some new goal which requires that we deny them. We may decide to go on hunger strike or take lifelong vows of chastity.

I am not concerned here with the philosophical problem of free will but with the psychological fact of the experience of choice. In so far as we have this experience, we *take* responsibility. We commit ourselves. In many cases this commitment does not last. But it may occasionally happen that, from all the possibilities open to us, we come at some stage to a choice that proves to be definitive and exclusive, so that thereafter, to adapt Emily Dickinson's words very slightly, we close the valves of our attention like stone.¹

The human beings who settle in this way on a single all-absorbing goal are few in number, and they tend to belong to certain cultural groups which favour this kind of commitment. But their existence reveals already that as a species we possess another attribute beyond that of being able to generate intentions that are new and varied. We possess also the ability to pursue our goals with great tenacity. This tenacity has a number of sources, but prominent among them is the fact that our purposes are apt to be accompanied by very powerful feelings. Thus they become important to us; and in the extreme case they can become more important than life itself.

It is not an everyday matter for someone to die rather than abandon a purpose. Yet such an event is common enough for us not to be specially surprised when we hear about it; and we are apt to feel admiration and respect even when we consider the behaviour misguided, the goal not worth dying for.

In spite of these facts of experience and observation, a number of serious attempts have been made to account for human behaviour without having recourse to the notion of intention or purpose at all. The notion, however, is one that tends to reappear in some guise or other within psychology, no matter how hard

one tries to keep it out. And it is ironic that the attempt to keep it out is generally itself sustained by a passionate aim: the aim of being 'scientific' in a manner modelled upon the activity of the physicists.

We should not, on the other hand, naively suppose that what people do is always and only determined by what they believe themselves to be trying to do. There is much of which we are unaware. Also we may deceive ourselves. These are topics to which later chapters will return.

The devising of novel purposes comes readily to us because we have brains that are good at thinking of possible future states – at considering not merely what is but what might be.

We exist in a world of 'hard fact', but we can imagine it as changed; and from a very early age we know that, within certain limits, we are able to change it. It matters very much to us to find out how these limits are set, an activity closely related to the general purpose of understanding what the world is like. In this context 'the world' includes other people as a most important component. And, if we have any wisdom, it also includes ourselves.

Human thought deals with how things are, or at least with how they seem to us to be, but it does this in ways that typically entail some sense of how they are not – or not yet. It deals with actuality and with possibility; but some recognition of possibility is already entailed even in the discovery of actuality whenever this is achieved by the characteristically human means of asking questions. Is it like this? Or is it perhaps like that?

We all ask many questions of this kind when we are young, and some of us retain the habit. A few even become fascinated by a single question and devote their lives to finding an answer. When Einstein was sixteen he asked himself a question that has since become famous: 'If I were to travel with a ray of light, what would I see?' He was inviting himself to consider the possibility, never realized in human experience, of travelling with light at its own speed.²

How he came to appreciate the significance of just this question, and so to make it *his* question, is a matter of great interest. But for now the point is that, having chosen it, he spent the next ten years searching for an answer. That answer, when it was finally found, took the form of the special theory of relativity, which led to a major revolution in ideas about the nature of space and time.

Years later Einstein said of himself: 'I have no special gift. I am only passionately curious.'³

We may dispute the first part of this statement, but as to the second we must take his word – and without surprise. The tenacity needed to get his answer had to come from some strong emotion. Without that he surely would have given up. On the other hand, he could not have reached that answer if he had not been adept at a certain kind of thought – a kind that has given us immense power and, with the power, many problems. We shall never understand the position of humanity today unless we understand not only the nature of this thinking but also how it relates to the rest of mental functioning, which in turn depends on an understanding of how the mind develops from birth on. Knowledge of being rests upon knowledge of becoming, in this case certainly, if not always.

In many ways different minds develop differently. This is an obvious truth, and it is implied in much that has been said already about the generation of goals and the experience of choice. However, there is also commonality. There is a framework within which the deviations are contained.

My account of the common framework entails the distinguishing of four main modes of mental functioning. These come in succession upon the scene as we grow older, but they do not replace one another. None of them is ever lost, except in severe injury or illness. But within each mode change occurs over time. They are not static. For instance, the functioning of the first mode in infancy is a very different matter from the functioning of that same mode in adulthood.

In defining the modes two kinds of criterion are used. First there is the *locus of concern*.

What I mean here by 'concern' is best captured by saying that a mind's concern at any given time is what its percepts, thoughts, emotions or actions are *about*. If they were not about anything, there would be no concern, and hence, of course, no locus of concern, which would mean that none of the modes, as here defined, would be in operation.

Being about something is often regarded as a fundamental attribute of mental states or acts. And this quality of 'aboutness' is known in philosophy by the technical term 'intentionality'.⁴ I have preferred to use the word 'concern' because of the risk that 'intentionality' will be taken as a property of intentions only, whereas ideas, hopes, beliefs and the like are also included in the technical meaning, as are signs and symbols that stand for something else. 'Intentionality' in this philosophical sense goes back to the Scholastic philosophers and their use of the Latin word '*intendere*' meaning 'to stretch or reach towards'.

We shall speak, then, of loci of concern. Four of these will be distinguished; and they will serve to specify the four main modes. The other kind of criterion, to which we shall come shortly, yields subdivisions of the four main categories. (When these subdivisions are referred to they will still be called 'modes' rather than 'submodes' to avoid cumbersome terminology.)

In the first mode – the only one available to the young infant – the locus of concern is always the present moment, the directly apprehensible bit of space, the 'here and now'. This mode is called the *point mode*.

Later other loci become possible. For example, the second mode, which is called the *line mode*, has a locus of concern that includes the personal past and the personal future.⁵ When we function in the line mode we look back to what has taken place in our lives so far, or forward to what we can consider as possible happenings. In due course the scope is extended beyond the range of personal experience, but by definition concern is still with specific events, actual or conceivable.

These two examples should already make it clear that 'locus of concern' is defined in terms of space-time. Notice, however, that