

**Full Title:** Does understanding individuals require idiographic judgement?

**Short title:** Does understanding individuals require idiographic judgement?

**Authors (i.e. name as it should appear on the paper):**

Tim Thornton

**Position (i.e. job description as it should appear on the paper):**

Tim Thornton

Professor of Philosophy and Mental Health and Director of Philosophy

**Address for correspondence:**

International School for Communities, Rights and Inclusion

University of Central Lancashire

Preston

PR1 2HE

**Other Contact Details:**

phone 01772895412

fax 01772892964

email:

TThornton1@uclan.ac.uk

**Key-words (not appearing in title):**

Philosophy, psychiatry, comprehensive diagnosis, Windelband, nomothetic.

**Word count (excluding title page but including references):**

~ 3,700

**Character count (abstract):**

~ 24,000

**Software used:** Microsoft Word

**Filename(s):**

# Does understanding individuals require idiographic judgement?

Tim Thornton

Author submitted version of Thornton, Tim (2008) 'Does understanding individuals require idiographic judgement?' *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience* 258 Suppl 5:104–109

## Abstract

Idiographic understanding has been proposed as a response to concern that criteriological diagnosis cannot capture the nature of human individuality. It can seem that understanding individuals requires, instead, a distinct form of 'individualised' judgement and this claim receives endorsement by the inventor of the term 'idiographic', Wilhelm Windelband. I argue, however, that none of the options for specifying a model of individualised judgement, to explain what idiographic judgement might be, will work. I suggest, at the end, that narrative, rather than idiographic, understanding is a more promising response to the limitations of criteriological diagnosis.

## Introduction

Idiographic understanding has been at the heart of recent discussion of psychiatric diagnosis. As part of its attempt to improve person centred mental health care, the World Psychiatric Association, for example, has established an Institutional Program on Psychiatry for the Person which calls for an idiographic component alongside conventional criteriological diagnosis. This call for idiographic judgement reflects a concern that criteriological diagnosis is too crude a tool to capture the nature of human individuality. Idiographic judgement would be aimed at the particular details of an individual's experiences, life history and values.

The role of idiographic understanding is set out in the WPA's proposed Idiographic (Personalised) Diagnostic Formulation as follows:

**8.1** The diagnostic process involves more than simply identifying a disorder or distinguishing one disorder from another. It should lead to a thorough, contextualised and interactive understanding of a clinical condition and of the wholeness of the person who presents for evaluation and care.

**8.2** This comprehensive concept of diagnosis is implemented through the articulation of two diagnostic levels. The first is a standardised multi-axial diagnostic formulation, which describes the patient's illness and clinical condition through standardised typologies and scales... The second is an idiographic diagnostic formulation, which complements the standardised formulation with a personalised and flexible statement.

**8.3** The preparation of the idiographic formulation starts with the recognition of the perspectives of the clinician, the patient and (whenever appropriate) the family, on what is unique, important and meaningful about the patient. The formulation sets out these perspectives and identifies any discrepancies, permitting their resolution and integration into a shared understanding of the case at hand. [2: 55]

Even from this brief outline, it is clear that the idiographic formulation proposed is in narrative form. Indeed the Workgroup goes on to say: 'The idiographic formulation should be presented in natural or colloquial language to maximise the flexibility of its presentation.' [2: 55]. I have argued elsewhere that the assimilation of idiographic and narrative is significant and that narrative is more promising than idiographic understanding [7, 8]. In this short note, my aim is to step back to consider in more detail how idiographic judgement might be thought to answer to the intuition that judgements about individuals require a special kind of 'individualised' judgement. I will call this the 'individualising intuition'.

The intuition is evident in, for example, this book review:

The biomedical model, [Luhrmann] argues, apprehends mental disorder as something separate from the patient's individuality and life history, the product of a 'broken brain' or 'twisted molecule', so that treatment targets a malfunction of the body, an 'it' rather than a

person. 'The explanatory foundation of mental illness ... lies beyond personhood, in biological microstructures that escape uniqueness' [4: 181]. [1: 1031]

The reported criticism of the biomedical model turns on the fact that its account of biological properties fails to capture the individuality and uniqueness of a person, by contrast with his or her body. It may seem, therefore, that a distinct and novel form of judgement is called for.

Idiographic understanding is supposed to answer the individualising intuition. It appears to be a form of understanding or judgement specifically designed to capture the nature of individuality. But whether it is a satisfactory response depends first on what it means. I will therefore, first, outline Windelband's account of idiographic understanding and then critically examine a number of possible interpretations of individualised judgement. I will argue that none is a coherent response to the individualising intuition. At the end I will make a few brief comments about why narrative understanding is a better response (for more detail see [7]).

### **Windelband's account of idiographic understanding**

Wilhelm Windelband first introduced the distinction between 'idiographic' and 'nomothetic' in his rectorial address of 1894 (for a fuller discussion of Windelband see [8]). Key components of the distinction are: that it is a distinction of method not of subject matter, that it concerns treating events as unrepeated, and that it is a reaction against an over-reliance on an essentially general conception of knowledge.

Windelband contrasts his own methodological distinction with one of substance, between natural sciences [Naturwissenschaften] and sciences of the mind [Geisteswissenschaften].

I regard the dichotomy as unfortunate. Nature and mind is a substantive dichotomy... not equivalent to a dichotomy based on modes of cognition. [9: 173]

Such a distinction of substance is a hostage to the fortune of a metaphysical distinction of kind between mind and the rest of nature. In psychiatry, the interplay of both broadly psychological methods and neurology makes drawing such a distinction premature and unhelpful.

Windelband proposes, instead, a distinction which places psychology (as he understands it) and other natural sciences on one side and other disciplines, which in Germany at the time were called 'sciences of the mind' but which have a distinct method, on the other. This gives rise to a characterisation of what he goes on to label 'idiographic' as follows:

[T]he majority of the disciplines that are usually called sciences of the mind have a distinctively different purpose: they provide a complete and exhaustive description of a single, more or less extensive process which is located within a unique, temporally defined domain of reality. [9: 174]

As first introduced, idiographic understanding concerns individual or unique cases. But, given that the distinction is supposed to be at the level of method not substance, this is not fixed by the subject matter so much as how that subject matter is approached. This is made clearer in the following passages in which the term 'idiographic' is first introduced:

In their quest for knowledge of reality, the empirical sciences either seek the general in the form of the law of nature or the particular in the form of the historically defined structure. On the one hand, they are concerned with the form which invariably remains constant. On the other hand, they are concerned with the unique, immanently defined content of the real event. The former disciplines are nomological sciences. The latter disciplines are sciences of process or sciences of the event. The nomological sciences are concerned with what is invariably the case. The sciences of process are concerned with what was once the case. If I may be permitted to introduce some new technical terms, scientific thought is *nomothetic* in the former case and *idiographic* in the latter case. [9: 175-6]

This suggests the following rough practical distinction. Nomothetic approaches are those that chart lawlike, or nomological, generalities. Their aim is to describe generalities. Idiographic understanding concerns individual cases described in non-general ways. Both are, however, forms of empirical

inquiry.

Such a distinction fits modern psychological usage influenced by Gordon Allport (1897-1967) in which 'idiographic' is used to describe case-study based qualitative research by contrast with quantitative cohort-based research (although whether Allport's use of nomothetic accords with Windelband's is a matter of dispute [3]). But neither the distinction itself nor its association with small scale qualitative research explains precisely the difference of method of idiographic approaches (what is done in a qualitative approach) and thus precisely what new element is being called for in comprehensive diagnosis. The proposed use in psychiatric assessment, after all, is to complement criteriological diagnosis which, though general in form, is, nevertheless, aimed at a single individual. Thus more is needed by way of characterisation than has been gleaned so far from Windelband or is implicit in psychology's use of the term.

While contemporary use in psychology suggests that idiographic and nomothetic forms of understanding are practically distinguishable but not fundamentally distinct, Windelband suggests that his distinction goes deeper. He relates it to a fundamental metaphysical divide:

[T]his distinction connects with the most important and crucial relationship in the human understanding, the relationship which Socrates recognized as the fundamental nexus of all scientific thought: the relationship of the general to the particular. [9: 175]

Idiographic understanding is thus a correction to an over-emphasis on the general in the metaphysics of thought.

The commitment to the generic is a bias of Greek thought, perpetuated from the Eleatics to Plato, who found not only real being but also real knowledge only in the general. From Plato this view passed to our day. Schopenhauer makes himself a spokesman for this prejudice when he denies history the value of a genuine science because its exclusive concern is always with grasping the specific, never with comprehending the general... But the more we strive for knowledge of the concept and the law, the more we are obliged to pass over, forget, and abandon the singular fact as such...

In opposition to this standpoint, it is necessary to insist upon the following: every interest and judgment, every ascription of human value is based upon the singular and the unique... Our sense of values and all of our axiological sentiments are grounded in the uniqueness and incomparability of their object. [9: 181-2]

The suggestion here is that examining value judgements helps to reveal the fundamental importance of particular cases as opposed to general kinds in judgements. It implies that there is an important role for a kind of judgement in which there is no implicit comparison – as there is with any general concept – with other cases. Such a judgement would be essentially particular or individualised.

Windelband's fellow neo-Kantian Heinrich Rickert also argues that there can be essentially particular or individualised judgements and that these are exemplified by value judgements. Unlike nomothetic accounts of, for example, the forces acting on bodies which are described and explained in general terms, judgements about the value of things are individualised judgements.

We are concerned here with the connection of objects with values; for a generalizing approach the objects are free of value-connection, they are exemplars, replaceable... This is what happens when we free the object of all connection with our interests – it becomes a mere exemplar of a general concept. An individualising approach is necessarily connected with the value-bound grasp of the object [mit der wertverbundenen Auffassung der Objekte]... [5: 354-5]

But although Windelband's discussion supports the suspicion of subsuming individuals under categories and the role, instead, of a kind of individualised judgement, he does not offer a very clear account of what form such an idiographic judgement might have. How precisely is a judgement supposed to reject an historical over-emphasis on the general? I will critically examine some of the options and argue that none are satisfactory. Thus, I will argue, idiographic judgement is not a satisfactory answer to the individualising intuition.

## Understanding individuals as pre-epistemic

It may be objected that to think of an individualised *judgement* is already too intellectual. Perhaps what is needed is a conception of inter-subjectivity, of being with others, which is presupposed by but is not itself a form of judgement. It is a pre-epistemic state. There is something right about this idea. The persistence of the ‘problem of other minds’ in philosophy of mind suggests that an overly intellectual, or theoretically charged, account of knowledge of other minds is wrong. If one starts from an assumption that all that is available as a clue to other peoples’ mental states is neutrally described evidence to serve as the ground for a theoretical inference, it is hard to regain our everyday epistemic confidence.

But it is one thing to grant an important role for a pre-epistemic background relation to others that grounds more explicit judgements. It is another to reject the importance of such judgements given that the pre-epistemic background is in place. Further, taking the idea of understanding individuals seriously requires aiming at getting their views and experiences *right* and the best word for aiming at rightness is ‘judgement’. (Additionally, judgement need not imply being judgemental. And saying that psychiatric assessment involves judgement does not undermine the importance of other features of it such as interpersonal warmth.) Thus understanding individuals should be construed as a form of judgement.

## Understanding individuals as singular judgement

The most abstract form of a judgement predicates a property of an individual. In the face of a suspicion of general judgements, some more individualistic notion of judgement seems to be called for. In principle this might apply to either element of judgement: predicate or subject.

A judgement that is constituted as the judgement it is by a relation to an individual subject is usually called a ‘singular judgement’. Examples in the philosophical literature include judgements with demonstrative elements (‘That cat is brown’; ‘This sense datum is red’; ‘I am hungry’) and names (providing that these are not analysed as Russell suggested as disguised general quantified judgements such as, for ‘Scott’, ‘The author of the Waverley novels’). Unlike existentially or universally quantified judgements, singular judgements depend for their meaning on the existence of the subject. If the subject does not exist then that undermines the meaning of the judgement. (By contrast, on Russell’s famous analysis of the statement ‘The present king of France is bald’ as a conjunction of general claims – ‘There is at least one present king of France’; ‘There is at most one present king of France’; and ‘Every present king of France is bald’ – it turns out to be merely false if there is no present king of France.)

But whilst there are some philosophical difficulties in analysing precisely how singular judgements work – that is, how it is possible to have a singular conception of an individual – there seems to be no problem with taking the subject matter of psychiatric assessment to be individuals understood in an everyday way. Their names can serve to pick them out. But since such names can also be used for the kind of criteriological diagnosis, that fact alone cannot underpin a distinct kind of judgement in this case. Intuitively, also, concentrating on the subject part of a subject and predicate model of judgement does not address the underlying intuition which is not that psychiatric assessment might fail to pick out individuals. It is, rather, that it might say the wrong sort of (general) thing about them. I will therefore focus on how the predicate might be used to address the individualising intuition.

## Understanding individuals via a unique predicate

One possibility is that, in an individualised judgement, a *unique* property is predicated of a subject. Merely contingent uniqueness, however, would not be sufficient to mark a contrast with criteriological judgement. Given the combination of general characterisations that make up both a DSM or ICD diagnostic framework, an individual might happen to fit a combination that fits no one else. If so, the complex predicate made up of a conjunction of the DSM or ICD criteria would be a unique predicate: a predicate that fitted only that one person. But that contingent fact alone would, surely, not address the individualising intuition.

The intuition seems to require that if a judgement ascribes a unique predicate to an individual, the

predicate is both unstructured (thus not composed of general criteria) and necessarily unique. It is the concept of a property framed specifically for that person. Does this idea make sense? Can we form an understanding of how such a response to the individualising intuition could contribute to psychiatric assessment?

The underlying problem is determining what such a judgement would mean, what it would code. By ruling out a generally applicable concept, this model has ruled out a context-independent way of specifying its content. In the absence of that, the predicate must be defined merely ostensively, by saying that it is the predicate that applies to a particular individual. But that does not help pick out the way the individual is being thought about. The predicate is, in effect, just a further name for the individual, not a way of conveying information about him or her.

### **Understanding individuals as epistemically independent judgement**

If a necessarily unique judgement fails as a coherent response to the individualising intuition, a more modest alternative is a model of a judgement which contains a general concept but whose application is independent of anything other than the individual in question. This is a model of a judgement which is individual not because of its surface form or conceptual structure but because of its epistemological status. But if this is what idiographic judgement is then it looks to be an instance of what the US philosopher Wilfrid Sellars (1912-1989) calls the 'Myth of the Given' and thus subject to his criticism of it.

Sellars uses the phrase 'Myth of the Given' to characterise a form of philosophical foundationalism. Such foundationalism aims to base empirical knowledge on immediate (thus, for empirical knowledge, perceptual) judgements which ground, and do not themselves depend on, other beliefs.

One of the forms taken by the Myth of the Given is the idea that there is, indeed *must be*, a structure of particular matter of fact such that (a) each fact can not only be noninferentially known to be the case, but presupposes no other knowledge either of particular matter of fact, or of general truths; and (b) such that the noninferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims – particular and general – about the world. It is important to note that I characterized the knowledge of fact belonging to this stratum as not only noninferential, but as presupposing no knowledge of other matter of fact, whether particular or general. [6: 68-9]

This schematic account of foundationalism is a helpful way of characterising the kind of individualised model of idiographic judgement under discussion here since idiographic judgement is also supposed to be a response to the particular and to presuppose no general truths.

Sellars goes on to accept that experience can provide non-inferential knowledge and that such experience can constitute the ultimate court of appeals for factual claims. But he denies the claim that it can presuppose no other knowledge of particular matters of fact. The reason for denying this third claim is that Sellars takes there to be a dual dependence between the kind of knowledge expressed in perceptual reports and an overall world-view. He suggests that perceptual knowledge has to jump two hurdles. The first concerns the reliability of the perceptual report.

The second hurdle is, however, the decisive one. For we have seen that to be the expression of knowledge, a report must not only have authority, this authority must *in some sense* be recognized by the person whose report it is. And this is a steep hurdle indeed. For if the authority of the report 'This is green' lies in the fact that the existence of green items appropriately related to the perceiver can be inferred from the occurrence of such reports, it follows that only a person who is able to draw this inference, and therefore who has not only the concept *green*, but also the concept of uttering 'This is green' – indeed, the concept of certain conditions of perception, those which would correctly be called 'standard conditions' – could be in a position to token 'This is green' in recognition of its authority. [6: 74-5]

Sellars' point here is that for a perceptual report (or for the perceptual experience reported) to be able to ground knowledge it must have what he calls 'authority'. Thus, eg, the report 'This is green' should justify the inference that there is something green near by. In addition, however, to count as a

perceptual *report* – a claim made by a subject – it must not only actually be a reliable indicator of the state of the world but also its subject must *know* that it is reliable. Without that, then the utterance would not be a report of, or a judgement about, anything. It would no more count as knowledge than some coincidentally reliable squawks from a parrot. The extra knowledge necessary for a report to have authority makes it depend more generally on the subject's world-view: in particular that specific types of perceptual experiences and thus reports correspond to specific types of states of affairs. But knowledge of this sort requires the kind of generality rejected by idiographic judgement. It requires knowledge of how *types* of experiences relate to types other people. Thus perceptual reports cannot underpin individualised judgement.

## Conclusions

Although idiographic judgement has been proposed as a complement to criteriological judgement in response to the intuition that the latter cannot capture the individuality and uniqueness of human subjects, it is difficult to determine what a coherent model of an individualistic form of judgement might be. None of the apparent options provide a coherent response to the individualising intuition. The assumption that understanding individuals requires a particular kind of individualised judgement appears, instead, to be mistaken.

Nevertheless, there is something right about the thought that criteriological diagnosis is merely a partial picture of individuals which can be substantially complemented by a distinct form of judgement. This, however, is not individualised judgement by contrast with nomothetic judgement, as Windelband suggests. It is rather normative or narrative judgement by contrast with judgement that subsumes under natural laws.

The kind of narrative formulation, couched in colloquial language, advocated by the WPA does not aim to fit individuals within a set of natural or statistical laws. It does not merely aim to show that behaviour is usual. Rather, like everyday inter-personal understanding, it aims to present an individual's speech and action in a way that makes as much *rational sense* as possible. That is, it aims to relate speech and actions to an individual's perspective on the world, their experiences and values, in such a way that, as far as possible, it would be rational to think and speak that way given those experiences and values. It aims to show how such speech and action has a point or purpose in accord with the beliefs and values of a subject. This has little to do with what is statistically usual. Thus a narrative formulation has a normative dimension, and that is how it is a genuine complement to criteriological diagnosis (for more detail see [7]).

## Bibliography

- 1: Haslam, N. (2000) 'Psychiatric categories as natural kinds: Essentialist thinking about mental disorders' *Social Research* 67: 1031-1058
- 2: IDGA Workgroup, WPA (2003) 'IGDA 8: Idiographic (personalised) diagnostic formulation' *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 18 (suppl 45): 55-7
- 3: Lamiell, J.T. (1998) "'Nomothetic" and "idiographic"' *Theory & Psychology* 8: 23-38
- 4: Luhrmann, T. M. (2000) *Of Two Minds: The Growing Divide in American Psychiatry*, New York: Knopf
- 5: Rickert, H. (1907) 'Geschichtsphilosophie' in Windelband, W. (ed) *Die Philosophie im Beginn des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts: Festschrift für Kuno Fischer*, Heidelberg: Carl Weinter, 1907: 321-422 (translation Lyne, I.)
- 6: Sellars, W. (1997) *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press
- 7: Thornton, T. (forthcoming a) 'Idiographic versus narrative approaches to assessment' *Psychopathology*
- 8: Thornton, T. (forthcoming b) 'Should comprehensive diagnosis include idiographic understanding?' *Medicine, Healthcare and Philosophy*

9: Windelband, W. (1980) 'History and natural science' *History and Theory & Psychology* 19: 169-85.