

Penultimate Version

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Philosophical Methodology: From Data to Theory

By JOHN BENGSON, TERENCE CUNEO, AND RUSS SHAFER-LANDAU

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It is impossible to study philosophical methodology without being struck by the state of absolute chaos of the field's methodological practices, methodological norms, and metaphilosophical beliefs. Not only are the methods of formal epistemology nothing like the methods of aesthetics, but even within specific debates and subfields, there are often significant disagreements about standards of proof, to say nothing about disagreements about the ultimate nature of the debate. The question facing metaphilosophers is whether this chaos is a feature or a bug. Is the chaos a part of philosophy's value as an incubator for new ideas or a sign that many philosophers have lost their way and are holding back philosophical progress?

In *Philosophical Methodology: From Data to Theory*, Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau take a markedly ecumenical and nonbelligerent approach towards ending the chaos, setting *Philosophical Methodology* apart from other notable and notably combative attempts to fix philosophical methodology. According to Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau, everything is mostly fine. Philosophy just needs a bit of a tune-up, and their proposal “would not represent a radical reorientation of how to engage in philosophical theorizing” (p. 131). To this end,

Philosophical Methodology is a breezy attempt to unite philosophy around the Tri-Level Method, a model of theory formation geared towards promoting understanding.

Most of *Philosophical Methodology* is spent building to the authors' Tri-Level Method through discussions of the relationship between philosophical inquiry, theory, and data. Chapter 1 explores the nature of inquiry, arguing that the ultimate proper goal of inquiry is theoretical understanding, "the state agents possess just when they fully grasp a theory" (p. 28) when that theory is accurate, reason-based, robust, illuminating, orderly, and coherent (p. 28-29). Chapter 2 evaluates existing accounts of philosophical data and rejects them as not conforming to basic facts about how data are used in philosophy, leading to a positive account in Chapter 3 in which data are theory-neutral things that inquirers collectively "have good reason to believe" (p. 57). Chapter 4 critiques existing models of philosophical methods as failing to ensure theoretical understanding, and Chapter 5 offers the Tri-Level Method as a replacement. Chapter 6 ends the book by arguing that the Tri-Level Method improves philosophy's prospect for making progress and helps reveal how much progress philosophy has already made.

The Tri-Level Method is the climax of *Philosophical Methodology*, promising to produce theoretical understanding by refining existing philosophical methodology through the structured application of defeasible desiderata. In so doing, the Tri-Level Method provides a flexible and putatively pluralistic methodological blueprint for philosophers while also offering a standard to judge philosophical theories. Level one deals with data. Data need to be *accommodated* by a theory, meaning that given the truth of the theory a "datum is likely to hold or be true" (p. 110), and data need to be *explained* by a theory. Any data a theory cannot explain or accommodate must be justifiably discarded. Level two grounds a theory by *substantiating* its claims and *integrating* it into our "best picture of the world" (p. 118). Level

three exists to resolve ties at level two, evaluating theories based on theoretical virtues constitutive of theoretical understanding. By following this schema, Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau promise that “with suitable methodological discipline, progress is within reach” (p. 164).

Readers need to approach *Philosophical Methodology* with the right expectations. Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau prioritize approachability and briskness, and the book can be read in just a few sittings. The book is therefore not a rigorous defense of a tightly formulated metaphilosophical framework, and arguments are often maddeningly quick. I suspect readers will like or dislike many of the arguments depending on whether they share the book’s underlying optimism and like its epistemology-first approach to all facets of inquiry. Liking the epistemology-first approach is particularly essential to get on board with the book’s central claim that theoretical understanding is the ultimate proper goal of (much of) philosophical inquiry, and optimism is required to buy into the book’s promise that the Tri-Level Method can in fact deliver the goods.

This quick pace is not itself a problem, and I hope *Philosophical Methodology* spurs on more like it. Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau are right: philosophers should be more “transparent and explicit about their methodological commitments” (p. 2). Approachable books like *Philosophical Methodology* are a great way to reach philosophers outside of the often-insular subdiscipline of metaphilosophy, and the book is valuable precisely because it offers a low barrier to get more of us thinking, *but wait, what should we be doing as philosophers?* Accordingly, I recommend *Philosophical Methodology*, particularly Chapter 4’s nicely compact critiques of existing methods, to anyone who wants to spend a few hours reflecting on how philosophy works.

The scope of the project is ultimately what lands Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau in trouble. Their first sentence is as ambitious and unqualified as the title *Philosophical Methodology*: “This book is an attempt to understand philosophical inquiry” (pg 1). This broad scope limits its utility as a reflection of philosophical methods. Combined with the book’s avowed pluralism and its focus on the “basic structure of theoretical inquiry” (p. 13), to accommodate the vast differences in topics, data collection methods, and metaphilosophical commitments found in philosophy, discussion takes place at an extremely high level of abstraction. Because of this, if the reader does not buy into the promise of the Tri-Level Method, it is not always clear what actionable recommendations the book offers – a problem exasperated by the relative lack of in-depth case studies. It is one thing to argue that philosophical theories should be multidimensional and not “privilege one particular criterion” (p. 90), but it is quite another to illustrate how this plays out in practice to equip us to spot failures of multidimensionality when we encounter them.

The most striking fact about the book’s scope is that *Philosophical Methodology* abandons its own unqualified goal of understanding philosophical inquiry by page 3. Here, Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau stipulate they are only interested in philosophy in its “theoretical mode”, or philosophy whose goal is fundamentally epistemic (p. 3). Aesthetic, political, and purely therapeutic projects of philosophical inquiry – such as the more pragmatist and activist strands of applied philosophy and conceptual engineering – will find little in *Philosophical Methodology* for them. A few pages later, exegetical practices by “historically oriented philosophical projects” are similarly set aside (p. 9).

Much of the exclusion found in *Philosophical Methodology* is tacit, and many philosophers

who struggle to find a home in contemporary philosophy departments will struggle to find a home here. The most benign form of this comes from the distinctly traditional taste in examples of philosophical questions in *Philosophical Methodology*, omitting subdisciplines outside of analytic philosophy's "core" like philosophy of economics, philosophy of law, and philosophy of education. More striking is the attitude taken towards non-analytic traditions of philosophy. Despite an early promise to discuss pragmatism's relationship to the book's theses (p. 22), pragmatism's only other explicit appearance is in a coda to Chapter 1 that claims that pragmatists and anti-realists are mistaken to dislike the book's account of inquiry because anti-realism depends on "an inflated notion of objectivity as requiring an 'absolute conception of the world'" (p. 34). No further explanation or justification for this claim is offered. Setting aside pragmatism, I could not tell you how contemporary philosophy in the traditions of African, Asian, continental, or Indigenous philosophy falls within the scope of *Philosophical Methodology*. Outside of the Introduction, except for passing references to deconstructionism (p. 104 fn. 33.) and Buddhism (p. 27) and the passage about pragmatism, contemporary non-analytic traditions of philosophy are simply never acknowledged as existing. Even then, the Introduction only recognizes the existence of non-analytic traditions (notably just phenomenology and deconstructionism) for a sentence to set their differences aside as orthogonal to the book's aims (p. 8). One might worry, however, that differences between traditions' goals, ontologies, and epistemic frameworks affects the universality of *Philosophical Methodology*'s arguments about philosophical inquiry. Do not worry if your philosophy lands on this list of exclusions and omissions, though, because, as Bengson, Cuneo, and Shafer-Landau clarify, "we recognize that philosophy can be done (and done well) in many other ways" (p. 80 fn. 4).

Herein lies the problem with any project aiming to describe and improve “philosophical methodology”. There is very little that unifies our discipline besides the fact we share the title “philosopher”. This lack of unity has only grown as post-colonial attitudes towards the canon have started taking root and there is an ever more palpable appetite to find whatever post-analytic future awaits our profession. This is the appetite that has led to the surge in interest in alternative methodologies like experimental philosophy and conceptual engineering as well as the rise of applied, world-facing projects. Therefore, anyone aiming to describe and improve philosophical methodology would be better off embracing the wonderful chaos of our line of work instead of ignoring it.

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