

Review of "What do Philosophers Do"

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Review of Penelope Maddy, "What Do Philosophers Do?: Skepticism and the Practice of Philosophy". Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Penelope Maddy sets out to do a number of distinct things in this book. One is to present the responses that mid-century ordinary language philosophers, especially Austin, Moore and Wittgenstein, make to sceptical challenges. A second is to contribute to epistemological debates by endorsing a version of this kind of response. And a third is to use this discussion to say something general about, as the title of the book has it, what philosophers do. The first of these is done very well, and shows up ways in which some common conceptions of ordinary language philosophy misrepresents what these philosophers were up to, and understates their achievements. But the second and third are less successful. There is so little engagement with philosophical work of the last 30 years, that the picture of philosophy we're left with is, at best, a representation of what philosophers did.

The discussions of mid-century philosophy, and philosophers, is very well done, and well worth reading for both epistemologists, and those interested in the history of analytic philosophy. Maddy does an excellent job of putting the views in their proper historical context. So we see the connections between Austin and Reed, but also the commonalities between Austin's work and Quine's contemporaneous work. And, for that matter, we get a good discussion of the relationship between Austin's methodological remarks, and his first-order epistemological work on knowledge and on perception. Maddy adds nuance to her portrayal of Moore in previous works, now seeing him as someone who rejected the demand to reply to the sceptic, rather than offering a particular kind of reply. And, drawing on recent work on the construction of *On Certainty*, we get a careful study of how the best parts of that book fit into the larger project of Wittgenstein's later work. I learned a lot from these parts of the book, and I think it is a valuable addition to the literature on mid-century philosophy.

Maddy doesn't want to just describe these views though, she also endorses a theory that draws heavily on their insights. Here's the broad picture, some of which is familiar from her earlier works. The story has two starring characters: the Plain Man and the Plain Inquirer. The Plain Man is the voice of untutored common sense. He thinks that scepticism is obviously false for some reason, because he can just see that there is a table. The Plain Inquirer, called the Second Philosopher in her earlier work, takes the Plain

Man's views as a starting point, but tests as many of the presuppositions of these views as possible. But, crucially, she always takes for granted other things that she believes while doing these tests. The idea is to put everything to the test, and see how it fits into a grand scientific picture, but to do so piecemeal. What the Plain Inquirer rejects is the Cartesian demand to put all of one's views to the test all at once. She also, I think, rejects the demand to defend assumptions that she can see from the start there will be no way to defend, such as the assumption that she's not in an extraordinary dream.

This all sounds reasonable, though at this point I'd like to know more precisely how this differs from a Quinean holism that insists we start our inquiries in the middle of things. Quine's nominalism and meaning scepticism do get briefly discussed in the book, but not his epistemology. But more pressingly, I'm not entirely sure what the response to scepticism is. At times it seems that Maddy, like Nozick and Dretske, rejects closure, and so thinks we can know a lot about the world even if we can't know that sceptical scenarios don't obtain. (She talks this way at the start of Lecture III, for example.) But at other times, such as in the closing line of the book, she talks as if she is neutral on Closure, and perhaps thinks that we might know that sceptical scenarios don't obtain, we just can't defend this claim to the sceptic's satisfaction. These are both worthwhile lines of response to scepticism, but they are very different lines, and it would be useful to know which it is.

If it's the first line, the one that rejects closure, I don't see how the Plain Inquirer can be so nonchalant about this rejection. Inquiry won't get very far if we can't use logic and mathematics to carry it out. Closure failures threaten to undermine every method that we use, unless we get some kind of method for sealing the failures off.

But the bigger concern I have with the book is with its representation of how epistemologists, and philosophers more generally, think. When Maddy discusses what epistemologists do, the representation feels 30-odd years out of date. The only 'contemporary' work discussed at length is Barry Stroud's 1984 book *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*. The scare quotes here are because Stroud's book is now as old as, say, *On Certainty* was when Stroud's book came out. And I don't think anyone in 1984 viewed *On Certainty* as a piece of contemporary epistemology, or thought that one could write a book about the state of contemporary epistemology focussing on it.

Maddy says that "much of the effort of epistemologists" is directed to analysing the concept of knowledge (60), and this discussion is "dominated by commentary on evermore-complex problem cases" (205). This may have been true in the late twentieth century, but it is a really misleading representation of contemporary epistemology. There is no discussion here of Williamson's arguments that no analysis is possible, nor of the objections to arguments by cases in recent meta-philosophy. She thinks epistemologists don't take Moore seriously enough, but there is no discussion of the resurgence of interest in Moorean views prompted by Jim Pryor's early work. She lauds Austin's careful study of how the verb 'know' is actually used, but pays no attention to the mountains of work on contextualist theories of knowledge in the last 20 years. In recent years, the bulk of work in epistemology has concerned either social epistemology, or formal epistemology, or the relationship between epistemology and ethics, but Maddy leaves

readers with a picture of philosophy where epistemologists care about none of those things.

All of this feels like a missed opportunity. Maddy ends the body of the book (excepting two short appendices) with a discussion of what philosophy does well. And the short answer is that when things go well philosophy does theory. It lays the groundwork for future sciences but it also, as Maddy stresses, deals with those theoretical questions that existing sciences raise but cannot on their own answer. Maddy argues that this kind of work, work that is continuous with sciences, work that evaluates our practical and theoretical methods while still using other methods of our own, is what the best philosophers have traditionally done, and what the best contemporary philosophy does.

But she leaves the reader with the impression that most epistemologists are not engaged in this kind of valuable project. She says that they are mostly doing conceptual analysis, and that conceptual analysis is (typically) not helpful to valuable philosophical projects. But, as I mentioned above, this just seems like a misrepresentation of the last generation's work in epistemology. A more accurate picture of the way epistemologists do work that interacts with theoretical work in psychology, in jurisprudence, in economics, in political science, and in linguistics, to name but a few, would not have left the reader with the sense of such a sharp gap between what epistemology is, and what it should be.

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