

What Do Philosophers Do? A Few Reflections on Timothy Williamson's *The Philosophy of Philosophy*

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I guess that, of all the comments on Tim Williamson's *The Philosophy of Philosophy* collected in this volume, mine will be the most sympathetic to the general picture that emerges from it. I wholeheartedly agree that, although it can be fruitfully practiced without getting out of one's armchair, philosophy does not have any distinctive subject matter, nor any distinctive method. In particular, there is no significant distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge, such that philosophical knowledge counts as *a priori* while typical scientific knowledge counts as *a posteriori*, and philosophers should not call their evidence 'intuitions', as if it had any peculiar epistemological, quasi-foundational, status. Nor should they appeal to linguistic understanding as a way to justify their claims, given that linguistic understanding falls short of providing any special access to any special truth (the fact is that our linguistic or conceptual competence is intrinsically holistic). As a consequence, one of 'the most prominent' among 'the self-images that philosophy inherited from the twentieth century' (p. ix), that according to which the philosopher's task and achievements are respectively linguistic or conceptual analysis and analytic or conceptual truths, is mistaken.¹ On the contrary,

* I would like to thank Antonio Capuano, Michael Devitt, Wolfgang Huemer and Daniele Sgaravatti for some suggestions and for their comments on previous versions of this work, and Richard Davies and Tim Williamson for their patience.

1 A partially different route to the same conclusion is through a defence of *conceptual atomism* (see Fodor 1998). For my version of it, see Bianchi (2005), where the conclusion is explicitly drawn: 'in the frame I'm sketching there isn't any place for *conceptual truths*. As a result, we should disclaim philosophers' prevailing understanding of their activity. Whatever it is, philosophy can't be *conceptual analysis*' (p. 95 n. 17). However, it is not clear that Williamson wants to commit himself to conceptual atomism. Sometimes he writes as if linguistic or conceptual analysis were one of the (many) things philosophers may aim at, the only problem being that much more than linguistic or conceptual competence is needed to succeed in it. Something like this has been suggested by both Tyler Burge and Georges Rey. See Burge (1979, 1986, 1989, and 1993), and Rey (1983, especially sec. IV, where a *Hypothesis of External Definitions* is formulated, and 1998). However, I find it difficult to understand the rationale for such a position.

‘the common assumption of philosophical exceptionalism is false’, and ‘[a]lthough there are real methodological differences between philosophy and the other sciences, as actually practiced, they are less deep than is often supposed’ (p.3). Given this broad agreement, and the pointlessness of rearguing for what Williamson has already so carefully argued, my reflections on his book will be concerned more with what he did not say than with what he did say in it.

Some years ago, while discussing Christopher Peacocke’s account of concepts (1992), Georges Rey (1996) observed in passing that a curious but significant difference between British and American philosophers may be detected: the former tend not to pay due attention to the epistemological challenge posed by Willard Van Orman Quine’s confirmation holism. In a sense, even though in his book Williamson certainly distances himself a lot from the British tradition of which Peacocke is an exponent, this seems to me to be true of him as well: he does not pay due attention to what on the other side of the Atlantic, thanks to the work of Quine and his disciples, has emerged from this very challenge: *philosophical naturalism* (or, as it is also sometimes called, *philosophy naturalized*). In what follows, I shall try to substantiate this claim.

It is undoubtedly true, as already noted, that the ‘self-image’ according to which the philosopher’s task is (*a priori*) linguistic or conceptual analysis was a very prominent – perhaps, the most prominent – one among analytic philosophers in the twentieth century, and is still quite prominent (more so, though, in Great Britain than elsewhere in the world, both in the twentieth century and now, and probably even more so in Oxford than elsewhere in Great Britain). It is just as certain, however, that that is not the only image that was elaborated in the twentieth century and is in circulation now. Of course, Williamson is aware of this. In the Preface, he mentions *naturalism* and *postmodern irony*, which, like linguistic or conceptual analysis (‘the linguistic turn’) he judges ‘obviously inadequate to most of the most interesting work in contemporary philosophy’ (p. ix). However, in what follows Williamson does not pause at all to discuss postmodernism (rightly so, in my opinion: analytic philosophers do not need to take it seriously) and honours naturalism only with sparse, negative comments (in one passage, he even goes as far as to equate it with ‘crude empiricism’, pp. 1-2).² The book is devoted to criticizing the

2 Actually, at one point he spends some time probing into the position of ‘some naturalists’ who ‘argue on evolutionary grounds that beliefs tend to be true’ (pp. 251-258). This position, however, is by no means constitutive of naturalism.

linguistic turn and its *a priori* methodology, and to offering a more plausible alternative.

The limited space that Williamson's book devotes to naturalism is somewhat surprising, considering that philosophical naturalism is quite popular among analytic philosophers nowadays (although more so in North America than in Great Britain, and probably more so elsewhere in Great Britain than in Oxford). But it is not so much because of its popularity as rather its content that Williamson's scarce consideration of it perplexes me. The point is, simply, that the consonance of his main claims with the basic tenets of philosophical naturalism is quite striking: *all* of Williamson's theses that I mentioned in the first paragraph have been common currency among naturalists for more than fifty years, since the publication of Quine's *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*. Quine himself summarized his paper by saying that one effect of abandoning the dogmas is 'a blurring of the supposed boundary between speculative metaphysics and natural science' (Quine 1951, p. 20). Isn't this exactly what Williamson argues for?³ In fact, every naturalist is ready to subscribe to his allegation that 'the common assumption of philosophical exceptionalism is false'.⁴ Just like natural scientists, philosophers start from empirical data, the contents of our 'empirical, theory-laden, revisable' judgments, which are often 'quick unreflective' 'responses to worldly phenomena' (and that is what the 'intuitions' appealed to by traditional, internalist, foundationalist epistemologists really consist in) and elaborate

3 Williamson might perhaps rejoin that he has gotten the same effect without abandoning a useful semantic distinction between analytic and synthetic sentences. But even here he is not as far from Quine's position as might appear. In a late article revisiting *Two Dogmas*, Quine wrote: 'I recognize the notion of analyticity in its obvious and useful but *epistemologically insignificant* applications' (Quine 1991, p. 61, my italics).

4 For a very concise but clear introduction to (my favourite version of) philosophical naturalism see Devitt and Sterelny (1999, chap. 14). In only a few pages, the authors briefly defend all the theses I mentioned in the first paragraph. Moreover, they take another step towards Williamson's picture by coupling naturalism with semantic externalism rather than with Quine's semantic nihilism. Let me add here that a further point of convergence is constituted by the pragmatic stance towards *skepticism*. Here is Williamson: 'Since escape from the radical skeptical predicament is impossible, one must take good care not to get into it in the first place' (p. 239). Here is the naturalist: '[The naturalistic approach] does not so much solve the skeptical problem as set it aside as uninteresting; it is a problem so framed as to be insoluble' (Devitt and Sterelny 1999, p. 277).

theories to account for them.⁵ They do not deal with language or concepts except when they do so explicitly, i.e., when they are concerned with those worldly phenomena that call for a theory of language or thought (even if they can make use of semantic considerations in the course of reasoning about something else, as Williamson rightly remarks: ‘that a question is non-semantic does not imply that semantics imposes no useful constraints on the process of answering it’, p. 284). If they work well, the products of their theorizing, like the products of natural scientists’ theorizing, may count as knowledge. Take, for example, Saul Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity*, surely one of the most interesting works in contemporary philosophy. There, Kripke started from empirical data, the contents of his (and our) judgments about certain real and imaginary cases involving uses of proper names, used these data to prove description theories of reference wrong, and elaborated a theory that explains the cases.⁶ In doing so, he worked well, and provided us with new knowledge about the semantics and metasemantics of proper names. At least in this case, the naturalists’ image of philosophy seems to fit quite well, and certainly much better than that offered by the linguistic or the conceptual turn.

Given all this, I think that, contrary to his avowed intentions, the best way of looking at Williamson’s book is not as the development of a new image of philosophy, more adequate to ‘the most interesting work in contemporary philosophy’, but rather as a profound and original contribution to the image already offered by naturalism.⁷ His contribution consists in new arguments against the main alternative image (chaps. 2-4), in

5 The quotations are taken from Devitt and Sterelny (1999, p. 285). For elaboration on the idea that so-called ‘intuitions’ are something like empirical judgments, see Devitt (2006) and chapter 7 of Williamson’s book (another point of convergence!). For an application of it to philosophy of language, see Devitt (forthcoming).

6 Actually, Kripke (1980, pp. 91-97) refrains from calling his a theory and presents it just as a ‘better picture’, since it does not offer necessary and sufficient conditions for reference to take place. He seems to think that reference is too primitive a relation to be fully accounted for in terms of something else. I believe that Williamson holds a similar view about knowledge. In my opinion, Kripke is wrong about this, and in my ‘Repetition and Reference’, in preparation, I try to develop his picture to a theory. In any event, this matter is irrelevant to what I say in the text. If you like, correct the claim by adding that sometimes, starting from empirical data, both scientists and philosophers elaborate pictures rather than theories.

7 After writing this comment, I discovered that, in a recent discussion of Williamson’s book, Robert Stalnaker urged, in passing, for a similar reading: ‘I

thoughtful reflections about the nature of evidence and against ‘Evidence Neutrality’, both in science and in philosophy (chap. 7), in subtle considerations about the logical structure of thought experiments – an important resource for philosophical inquiry – (chap. 6), and finally (chap. 5) in a new account of the epistemology of metaphysical modality based on our ‘ordinary cognitive capacity to handle counterfactual conditionals’ (p. 136).⁸ The latter seems to me to be an especially important contribution, because, by showing that we can come to know that something is necessary or possible just by running offline the same capacities that we run online when we come to know that something is the case, it may help to dismantle the suspicions about metaphysical modality that Quine instilled in some of those in the naturalist camp and so to rehabilitate the idea that one of the tasks of philosophers is that of putting forward necessary truths. All in all, Williamson’s is an important reflection about the actual methods of philosophy, to which probably neither Quine nor his disciples paid enough attention.⁹ In my opinion, this reflection provides strong evidence for philosophical naturalism.

Wait a moment, someone might object, didn’t you say that Williamson and you agree that philosophy can be fruitfully practiced without getting out of one’s armchair, while it is well-known that naturalists are against armchair philosophy? Here much depends on what is meant by ‘armchair philosophy’. If armchair philosophy is philosophy supposedly pursued by

would categorize Williamson’s general picture as a version of philosophical naturalism: the general message is that philosophy is continuous with natural science and more generally with empirical inquiry. While every inquiry has its distinctive methods, there is no sharp division between the methods of philosophical inquiry and the methods of natural science. And while every inquiry, including philosophy, has its own distinctive set of questions and problems, philosophy has no restricted subject matter. In particular, it is not exclusively about language, or about concepts, but is about the world that we use language and concepts to talk and think about’ (Stalnaker 2011, p. 508). See Williamson (2011, p. 515) for a reply that I consider too short. Thus, I hope that this will be an occasion for him to expand on this point. I thank Daniele Sgaravatti for drawing my attention to the Stalnaker-Williamson exchange.

- 8 I am a bit more perplexed about the Principle of Knowledge Maximization that Williamson defends in chapter 8. What role is this principle supposed to play? I feel here the danger of slipping into interpretationism.
- 9 For Quine’s unsatisfying work on this, see Quine (1969, 1975, and 1990). It is marred by his behaviourism (or, as Williamson would probably call it, his crude empiricism).

traditional *a priori* methods, then certainly philosophical naturalism rules it out, but Williamson does not like it, either.¹⁰ If, on the contrary, it is only philosophy that is not practiced in experimental laboratories, then in my opinion naturalists should not have anything against it: experimental philosophy is just an extreme branch of philosophical naturalism. Indeed, what characterizes naturalism is the idea that philosophy is akin to natural sciences in theorizing starting from empirical data. Now, once the relevant empirical data have been collected, both philosophers and scientists may theorize whilst sitting comfortably in their armchairs, by applying to the data the various skills that are needed to elaborate a theory that explains them. If they work well, they may produce new knowledge without getting out of their armchairs. Something like this, I have been told, is true even of the birth and the development of Albert Einstein's theory of relativity.

But if this is so, the objector might continue, how is it that experimental laboratories are indispensable for contemporary natural science, while 'philosophical' experimental laboratories were inconceivable at least until ten years ago and are still deemed to be useless by most philosophers? Here, part of the answer may come from Williamson's account of the epistemology of metaphysical modality. Laboratories are needed to obtain new empirical data from which to theorize and against which to test the products of the theorizing, but often philosophers aim at necessary truths, and if Williamson is right, no new empirical data are needed to reach them: we just have to appeal to our background knowledge and run offline those cognitive capacities that we run online in laboratories and elsewhere. But there is a much more general answer to the objector's question, I think. The fact is, simply, that the empirical data that philosophers need to start their theorizing are very often easy enough to obtain without spending time visiting experimental laboratories: they are data that each of us has already collected and stored in his memory in the course of his normal life and that he can recall while sitting in his armchair. In other words, using the terminology we introduced to characterize naturalism: philosophers' starting points are quite often empirical judgments ('intuitions') which are responses to worldly phenomena with which they are well acquainted in their ordinary life, while scientists' data concern mostly worldly phenomena which they can observe only through

10 For a recent critical examination of the prospects for a priori knowledge from a naturalistic point of view, see Devitt (2011).

means usually located in laboratories (try bringing a cyclotron to your armchair!).

Well, the objector might insist, but why is there this conspicuous difference between the data needed to philosophize and those needed to do science? Aren't you reintroducing philosophical exceptionalism by another route, thus betraying the spirit of philosophical naturalism? By no means. We should, instead, recognize that when the activity that we call 'philosophy' begins to specialize in order to become more predictive and gain explanatory power, and consequently to develop technical instruments to obtain more detailed empirical data, it simply ceases to be called 'philosophy'. But it is the same sort of investigation, with the same subject matter and the same kind of methods before and after this evolution. It is always *nature*, in its many aspects, that human beings are in the business of producing knowledge of, both when philosophizing and when doing science.

A final remark. Like any image, naturalism did not come without its own shortcomings. One of these was due to modal knowledge, which was difficult to accommodate in the resulting framework. With regard to this, Williamson's account of the epistemology of metaphysical modality is certainly an important contribution, as we have seen. But another major shortcoming is due to logical and mathematical knowledge. How can it be accommodated in the naturalistic framework? Unfortunately, in his book Williamson does not deal with this issue at all, probably because logical and mathematical knowledge is not so directly connected with philosophical knowledge as modal knowledge is. May we hope that in another work he will contribute to naturalism in this respect as well?

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