



Book Review  
*The Philosophy of Philosophy*, by Timothy Williamson

Luis S. Robledo  
LOGOS, University of Barcelona

*Disputatio* Vol. 3, No. 25

November 2008

DOI: 10.2478/disp-2008-0010

ISSN: 0873-626X

## Book reviews

**The Philosophy of Philosophy**, by Timothy Williamson. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, xiv + 332 pp.

The topic of Williamson's latest book is the methodology of philosophy. The crucial question is how it can be pursued from the armchair and yet be regarded a theoretically serious and knowledge-providing enterprise. In the dawn of the analytic tradition, two attitudes prevailed: some proclaimed philosophy's continuity with the sciences and rejected armchair methodology altogether, and others vindicated the *a priori* method of philosophy by conceiving of it as an examination of our language or concepts, and hence as specifically concerned with questions that are ultimately linguistic or conceptual in nature. In either case, metaphysical questions got dissolved into more pedestrian issues. But over the last fifty years many analytic philosophers have relapsed into exploring some of the grand old themes from the armchair, thus making the question pressing once again.

In this essay, the author puts forward a new answer that does not intend to exhaust all methods for good philosophical theorizing, but that purports to remove the suspicion that philosophy is mysteriously special and different from the sciences in this respect. The project has two parts. First, he tries to show that not only is it the case that, contrary to the linguistic turn, many (if not most) philosophical questions are not even implicitly about language or thought (chapter 2), but also that this is just as it should be, because there is no notion of analyticity available that can support the thesis that all philosophical truths are analytic in order to validate philosophy's *a priori* nature. About one third of the book (chapters 3 and 4) is devoted to attacking several accounts of analyticity in the market. The second part of the project, which takes up the rest of the book, is advertised as the development of a positive alternative account of the armchair methodology of philosophy according to which the capacities philosophers employ are by no means exclusive or peculiar, but rather general abilities available for all sorts of cognitive tasks, both theoretical and mundane. Coming somehow short of the expectations, Williamson only presents and discusses one such capacity, namely, our ability to

assess counterfactual conditionals, which, he claims, grounds both our epistemic access to metaphysical modalities (chapter 5) and the validity of thought experiments (chapter 6) as a means to attain philosophical knowledge. To strengthen his case he also draws on ideas from his previous book (*Knowledge and its Limits*), in particular his account of evidence and his conception of knowledge as basic, in order to secure the evidential status of the deliverances of this capacity against specific forms of skepticism about it (chapters 7 and 8). The rest of this review will concentrate on his criticisms of analyticity and his defense of counterfactual thinking as a source of modal knowledge.

Following Boghossian, Williamson divides accounts of analyticity in two kinds: metaphysical and epistemological. The former construe it as truth solely in virtue of either meaning (in the case of sentences) or concepts (in the case of thoughts) and, consequently, view analytic statements as imposing no constraints on the world. The latter take analyticity to consist in a special epistemic status (knowledge or justification) that certain sentences have just in virtue of the understanding conditions of their constituent words (or that some thoughts have just in virtue of the possession conditions of their constituent concepts).

Two accounts of analyticity as truth in virtue of meaning are examined. One of them he labels 'modal-analyticity,' and it counts as analytic any truth whose meaning is 'sufficient for truth' in that necessarily, in any context any sentence with that meaning is true. The other is what Boghossian calls 'Frege-analyticity,' a property a sentence has just in case it is synonymous with a logical truth. Both notions, Williamson claims, are inadequate for the purpose at hand for two reasons.

First, neither provides the expected explanation of the alleged special epistemology of analytic truths, since these definitions do not make them insubstantial in any relevant sense. Classifying a sentence as modal-analytic, for instance, does not prevent that it expresses a deep necessary metaphysical truth about the world, for it would do so only if we could assume that any necessary truth is merely verbal or insubstantial, something that Kripke has taught us we cannot do. Furthermore, even typical *a posteriori* necessities like 'Water is H<sub>2</sub>O' may be modal-analytic according to the definition, given that in Twin Earth this very sentence does not have the same meaning it has in our context — because 'water' does not have the same meaning here and there. Frege-analytic truths, on the other hand, are supposed to inherit their epistemic status from the logical truths they are synonymous with, but to assume without further argument that these are

insubstantial is, according to Williamson, to beg the question. He says that the fact that an elementary logical truth like 'All furze is furze' is obvious 'does not justify the idea that it imposes no constraint on the world rather than one which, by logic, we easily know to be met' (p. 65) and to insist that the case ruled out by such constraint, namely that not all furze is furze, 'does not express a genuine case is to argue in a circle. For it is to assume that a genuine constraint must exclude some logically consistent case' (p. 65). But, it is not clear whether he is providing a real alternative here. The idea that logical truths impose no real constraint on the world was supposed to explain why they have the peculiar epistemology they do and Williamson seems to be trying to explain it by the fact that we are logically competent, which would be circular. On the other hand, many friends of Frege-analyticity may feel satisfied with the idea of constraints easily known to be met by logic alone as their notion of insubstantiality. Nevertheless, as Williamson points out, Frege-analyticity still relies heavily on relations of synonymy and analyses of concepts that have proved much more elusive than initially thought.

The second reason against these notions is that both fail Kripke's adequacy condition that analyticity implies necessity, because cases of the contingent *a priori* are both modal and Frege-analytic. Consider the sentence 'It is raining if and only if it is actually raining.' It is modal-analytic, given that 'it is raining' and 'it is actually raining' will be necessarily equivalent in any context of utterance, and it is also Frege-analytic, since it is true in every model. However, this sentence, if true, will be only contingently so, because even though 'it is raining' and 'it is actually raining' will be equivalent in any context, if it is indeed raining in the actual world, in any sunny counterfactual world the latter will still be true but the former will be false and hence, so the biconditional. It is remarkable that Williamson makes no reference here to the epistemic variant of two-dimensionalism Chalmers and Jackson support, since he is crucially exploiting the ambiguity of worlds as context of utterance and of evaluation they would denounce. They distinguish two senses of 'necessary' (and 'contingent') precisely to avoid the difficulties mentioned. Contingent *a priori* truths have contingent secondary intensions, but necessary primary intensions (world of utterance and evaluation are the same), which additionally explains their insubstantiality: I do not need to know which of the worlds I deem possible is the one I am in, in order to know that any of these sentences is true.

Finally, Williamson considers taking stipulative definitions as paradigms of analyticity and points that the fact that a sentence is made true by stipulation does not however make it insubstantial. Imagine we introduce the term 'zzz' as a synonymous for 'short sleep', then 'A zzz is a short sleep' will be true automatically but not solely in virtue of our stipulation, which only delivers the Frege-analyticity of the sentence in virtue of its synonymy with the logically true 'A short sleep is a short sleep,' whose insubstantiality, according to the author, has not been established.

Epistemological conceptions of analyticity rest on the assumption that there is a strong link between understanding and assent: analytic sentences/thoughts are those failure to assent to which is constitutive of failure to understand them. The idea is, then, that mere linguistic competence endows us with knowledge (or justification or some other epistemically relevant property) of some truths without the need to check the world and those are the ones philosophers build upon.

Williamson thinks, however, that understanding-assent links do not really hold for any sentences or thoughts. The reason is, in a nutshell, that a clever imaginative person can find intelligent — even if not necessarily good — reasons to withhold assent to sentences/thoughts that seem obvious enough to be the strongest candidates for such link. This is the longest and most meticulously discussed part of the book, which makes it impossible to make a thorough review of all the objections, replies and rejoinders and, therefore, I will only present the main line of argument. Williamson has us consider the sentence 'Every vixen is a vixen' (and the thought it expresses), and imagine two fellows, Peter and Stephen, who regard it as false for sophisticated though probably mistaken reasons. Peter thinks that this sentence presupposes and hence logically implies that there is at least one vixen (for general semantic reasons he takes every sentence of the form 'Every F is a G' to presuppose 'There is at least one F'). He also has a weird theory of the world according to which there are no vixens simply because there are no foxes at all and we are all subject to a global and perversely orchestrated fox hallucination. Stephen, on the other hand, does not have especially weird beliefs about the world but is very sensitive to vagueness and regards borderline cases as lacking truth-value. He additionally takes 'Every F is a G' to be true in case 'if x is an F then x is a G' is true for every value of 'x,' and false when this sentence is false for some value of 'x.' He also endorses a trivalent logic (not uncommon in the vagueness market) to deal with borderline cases that assigns a condi-

tional the value 'true' only if either its antecedent is false or its consequent is true, and the value 'false' only if its antecedent is true and its consequent is false. Finally, Stephen believes that some evolutionary ancestors of foxes are borderline cases of 'fox.' The females of this so-called species are then borderline cases of 'vixen,' so for them 'x is a vixen' is neither true nor false and, consequently, neither is 'if x is a vixen then x is a vixen.' Given, then, that there are values of 'x' for which the conditional is neither true nor false, the same happens, so he thinks, with 'Every vixen is a vixen.' Even if we consider that these two subjects base their judgement in some mistake or other, here we have two rational agents that do not take this apparently obvious sentence to be true and not because they fail to understand it just as we do, but because they have different beliefs about the world in one case and about logic and semantics in the other. But there are also real cases like these: all the competent professional logicians and philosophers who reject classical logic are refusing to assent to some allegedly analytic statement, even to quite obvious ones, as in the case of Vann MacGee, who claims to have found counterexamples to *modus ponens*, and therefore refuses to assent to it although it seems to be required by the understanding of 'if.' In his case, more clearly than in those of Peter and Stephen, to impute this failure to assent to a failure in understanding is very implausible. So, according to Williamson, even if any two speakers of the same language must share a large number of platitudes, no specific set of them is required to be common either to speak the same language or mean the same by some word.

Along with this criticism of the notion of analyticity, which already have a negative bearing on the recent rebirth of rationalism, what readers may find most interesting and original is Williamson's non-rationalist account of modal knowledge. The basic idea is that our capacity to know metaphysical modalities, which seem the exclusive preserve of philosophers, gets explained by our much less specific and contentious ability to correctly assess counterfactual conditionals. The account has two steps. First Williamson tries to show that we come to know many counterfactual conditionals by performing a 'simulation' in imagination. Suppose you see a rock slide down a slope and fall into a bush and

wonder where it would have landed if the bush had not been there. A natural way to answer the question is by visualizing the rock sliding without the bush there, then bouncing down the slope into the lake at

the bottom. Under suitable background conditions, you thereby come to know this counterfactual:

- (6) If the bush had not been there, the rock would have ended in the lake. (p. 142)

The envisaged imaginative exercise is not unconstrained (otherwise it would not be of much cognitive use), but rather

radically informed and disciplined by your perception of the rock and the slope and your sense of how nature works. (p. 143)

Basically, what you do is run offline the same cognitive faculties that are run online in the case of actual perception. Williamson summarizes this process for evaluating counterfactual conditionals thus:

... one supposes the antecedent and develops the supposition, adding further judgments within the supposition by reasoning, offline predictive mechanisms, and other offline judgments. The imagining may not be perceptual imagining. All of one's background knowledge and beliefs are available from within the scope of the supposition as a description of one's actual circumstances for the purpose of comparison with the counterfactual circumstances... Some but not all of one's background knowledge and beliefs are also available from within the scope of the supposition as a description of the counterfactual circumstances... (p. 153)

... if I find a counterfactual connection between A and C (my counterfactual development of A robustly yields C) without too much fuss I can assert  $A \Box \rightarrow C$ . If I fail to find a counterfactual connection between A and C (my counterfactual development of A does not robustly yield C), I cannot deny  $A \Box \rightarrow C$  without some implicit or explicit assessment of the thoroughness of my search... (p. 155)

The second step is to show that metaphysical modalities are equivalent to counterfactual statements. Williamson presents three versions (i.e., three pairs of equivalents, one per modality), but two of them he takes from Stalnaker and Lewis and only the following is his own:

- (a)  $\Box A \equiv (\neg A \Box \rightarrow \perp)$  (A is metaphysically necessary iff its negation counterfactually implies a contradiction)  
 (b)  $\Diamond A \equiv \neg(A \Box \rightarrow \perp)$  (A is metaphysically possible iff it is not true that it counterfactually implies a contradiction)

We may then employ the foregoing recipe to arrive at knowledge of the counterfactuals on the right and thereby come to know the corresponding modal claims on the left. If in developing the supposition that A is false we arrive at a contradiction, we come to know that A is necessary (as we so often do in *ad absurdum* proofs), and if we arrive at none from the supposition that A and find reason to think that our search was thorough enough, we come to know that A is possible. Even though there is no pretension that this is the only way of coming to know claims of metaphysical modality, Williamson thinks he has provided an account that at the same time does justice to the pre-theoretic intuition that we do have some modal knowledge and explains why some modal claims are so contentious: all the difficulty in coming to a consensus on whether disembodied souls are possible, for instance, can be attributed to the difficulty in developing the corresponding supposition and arriving at an acceptable verdict. One interesting and at this point probably expected corollary of the proposal is that the exhaustiveness of the *a priori/a posteriori* classification for all our knowledge gets refuted as the case of the falling rock shows: it is not by experience that we know that if the bush had not been there the rock would have ended in the lake (for we have not seen that), and hence it is not *a posteriori*; but it is not *a priori* either, for experience did play a relevant role in coming to know it (for it is involved in making our skill to apply concepts offline reliable enough). As a consequence, much philosophical knowledge may be obtained from the armchair without being *a priori*. In effect, according to Williamson, philosophical conclusions usually thought to have been arrived at by way of an *a priori* intuition in thought experiments, such as that a person in a Gettier situation has justified true belief but lacks knowledge, are to count as offline exercises of our competence in applying the relevant concepts — that of knowledge in this case — online in the usual manner. Understanding is necessary but rarely sufficient for having such competence.

There are two main virtues Williamson claims for his account. The first is that there is no reliance on mysterious faculties that suspiciously enough only philosophers employ, such as George Bealer's rational intuition, roughly characterized as some sort of intellectual seeming, which the latter postulates as the source of modal and other *a priori* knowledge. It is hard however to evaluate whether the charge is fair given that there is not much about the theory of concepts in this book apart from Williamson's repeated conviction that we should not

build all alleged *a priori* (or at least non-*a posteriori*) truths involving some concept into its understanding/possession conditions. But that is precisely what Bealer does and uses to explain the nature of rational intuition: a person who has what he calls 'determinate understanding' of a concept A will enjoy an *a priori* reliable inclination to regard some statements of the form 'the property of being A = the property of being B' as true, and that serves as basis for deriving the rest. It is not obvious that this account will work, but I do not see it as any more mysterious than Williamson's own claim that our acquired skills to apply concepts in normal empirical circumstances may make us reliable in applying them in imagined scenarios. It seems that we should wait for a theory of concepts and our competence in applying them to settle which of these is more parsimonious. Rationalists such as Bealer may feel inclined to say then that it is full competence with a concept that provides the evidential basis for both modal and counterfactual thinking without any priority of the latter over the former.

The second alleged virtue of the account is its reliance on unproblematic multi-purpose cognitive capacities. Williamson claims that although '[h]umans evolved under no pressure to do philosophy' (p. 136), they were pressed to become reliable at counterfactual thinking, because '[i]n practice, the only way for us to be cognitively equipped to deal with the actual is by being cognitively equipped to deal with a wide variety of contingencies, most of them counterfactual' (p. 137). This is an interesting but also probably contentious claim. Surely, tendency to be overoptimistic in evaluating the consequences of a hypothetical action or state of affairs will jeopardize our survival, but is it obvious that systematic accuracy will be selected for over systematic (and cautious) pessimism? Pessimism will most probably reduce chances of success (nothing ventured, nothing gained) but it may also minimize the risks. In any case, we now have reason to be interested in the products of empirical research on the psychology of counterfactual thinking to answer these questions and determine whether this program can be further developed.

For obvious reasons this review leaves out much that is explored in the book. For instance, an account of the epistemology of thought experiments which provides a very thorough examination of the one Gettier used to argue against the traditional analysis of knowledge. I think many readers will find it a paradigmatic example of analytic philosophy to be presented to students for its level of rigor and the perspicuous use of the resources provided by modern logic. Fans of

philosophical logic may also interest themselves with the logical appendices, one of which presents modal logic as a subsystem of the logic of counterfactuals. Last but not least, the work also includes an afterword that is both a severe reprimand to the analytic community for a certain sloppiness and an exhortation to all colleagues to apply more rigor and patience in addressing metaphysical issues. People familiar with Williamson's work will not be surprised by the careful and detailed (sometimes a bit technical) argumentation, which demands careful attention from the reader. As expected, this is a most relevant contribution to an increasingly popular topic by one of today's leading analytic philosophers.

Luis S. Robledo

Sociedad Argentina de Análisis Filosófico, Buenos Aires

LOGOS Research Group, Barcelona

lsrobledo@yahoo.com.ar

**Our Knowledge of the Internal World**, by Robert Stalnaker.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press, 2008, 160 pp.

In spite of decades of extensive discussion, conscious experience remains puzzling, stubbornly resisting accommodation within a naturalistic picture of the world. In his recent monograph *Our Knowledge of the Internal World*, given as the John Locke Lectures at the University of Oxford in 2007, Robert Stalnaker tries to solve the puzzle by offering an account of conscious experience that locates it within a materialistic conception of reality — an account that does not assign the knowledge of our experiences a privileged and foundational epistemological status. The book paradigmatically exemplifies one of Stalnaker's most characteristic philosophical virtues: a rare combination of depth and breadth in perspective with formal rigor and technical precision. It is extraordinarily rich and dense, requiring a close reading, that is, however, more than rewarded.

The background theme for *Our Knowledge of the Internal World* is Stalnaker's externalism. This theme comprises a number of different motifs. One is an anti-foundationalist approach to epistemology: there is no privileged basis from which to build up our knowledge, we have to 'start in the middle.' A further element is a naturalistic reductionism about intentionality; one, moreover, according to which inten-