

Critical Notice

The Philosophy of Philosophy by Timothy Williamson (Blackwell, Oxford, 2007), xiv + 332 pp.

P. M. S. Hacker

I

Discussion of the nature of philosophy was common among analytic philosophers both prior to the Great War, e.g. Russell's *Our Knowledge of the External World as a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy* (1914) and in the inter-war years, e.g. the *Tractatus*, papers from the Cambridge school of analysis, the *Manifesto* of the Vienna Circle and writings by its members. This reflective tendency continued after the Second World War, especially among Oxbridge philosophers, but faded during the 1950s. It seemed that sufficient consensus had been reached for one to cease preaching and to concentrate upon putting into practice the principles preached. Some of the landmarks of the two post-war decades were Carnap's *Meaning and Necessity* (1947), Ryle's *Concept of Mind* (1949), Wittgenstein's *Investigations* (1953), Anscombe's *Intention* (1957), Berlin's inaugural lecture *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958), Strawson's *Individuals* (1959), Hampshire's *Thought and Action* (1959), Quine's *Word and Object* (1960), Hart's *Concept of Law* (1961), Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia* and *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), and von Wright's *The Varieties of Goodness* and *Norm and Action* (1963). To be sure, different streams of analytic philosophy flowed side by side here – Carnap, a leading member of the Circle, further elaborated logical empiricism, and Quine, an apostate from the doctrines of the Circle (as he averred), evolved his distinctive form of logical pragmatism; Wittgenstein plowed his own furrow; and the Oxford group of philosophers, influenced by him to a greater (Anscombe, Ryle) or lesser (Strawson, Hampshire) extent, or not at all (Austin, Grice), developed their own styles and methods. Despite fruitful diversity, most (except Quine) would have agreed that philosophy is an a priori conceptual investigation. As Strawson later observed: 'our essential, if not our only, business is to get a clear view of our concepts and their place in our lives'¹,

¹ P. F. Strawson, 'Intellectual Autobiography' in L. E. Hahn ed. *The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson* (Open Court, Chicago and La Salle, 1998), p. 20.

and ‘to establish the connections between the major structural features or elements of our conceptual scheme’.² Most would have agreed that a primary way to attain a clear view of our concepts was to investigate the use of words that express them. The idea that a linguistic investigation of the use of ‘X’ and a conceptual investigation of X were not *also* investigations into the nature of X-s would have struck analytic philosophers of the day as perverse. Wittgenstein wrote: ‘One ought to ask, not what images are or what happens when one imagines anything, but how the word “imagination” is used. But that does not mean that I want to talk only about words.’³ Austin remarked ‘When we examine what we should say when, . . . we are looking again not *merely* at words . . . but also at the realities we use the words to talk about; we are using a sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of, though not as final arbiter of, the phenomena.’⁴ And Hart, who revolutionized philosophy of law, held that ‘the suggestion that enquiries into the meanings of words merely throw light on words is false. Many important distinctions, which are not immediately obvious, between types of social situation or relationships may best be brought to light by an examination of the standard uses of the relevant expressions . . .’⁵

By the mid-1970s, however, analytic philosophy was changing. Dummett, Davidson and their projects of a theory of meaning for a natural language dominated the scene. The theories of Frege and Tarski were invoked for novel purposes. So-called ‘ordinary language philosophy’ was dismissed with more contempt than understanding. Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity* (1972) revived metaphysics, not as a description of the most general structural features of our conceptual scheme (Strawson), but as a theory concerning *de re* necessities. This satisfied the perennial philosophical craving for a subject matter. The next two decades saw another shift of interest – the emergence of

² P. F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism – some Varieties* (Methuen, London, 1985), p. 23.

³ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1953), §370.

⁴ J. L. Austin, ‘A Plea for Excuses’, repr. in *Philosophical Papers* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1961), p. 130.

⁵ H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1961), p. vii.

scientific philosophy of mind allied with cognitive pseudo-science. By the turn of the century, this too occupied centre-stage.

Despite these radical methodological changes, the nature of philosophy and its methods has been little discussed by recent analytic philosophers of the new persuasion. Professor Timothy Williamson, Wykeham Professor of Logic at the University of Oxford, has written *The Philosophy of Philosophy* to remedy this lacuna. The book, he tells us, grew out of a sense that contemporary philosophy lacks a 'self-image' that does it justice. The 'self-images' inherited from the past century – he surprisingly cites only naturalism, the linguistic turn and post-modernism – seem to Williamson inadequate to fit much of 'the liveliest, exactest, and most creative achievements of the final third of the century' – these being, in his view, revivals of metaphysical theorizing (19). The rethinking of philosophical methodology, he avers, involves understanding, at an appropriate level of abstraction, *how philosophy is actually done* (6).

The Philosophy of Philosophy contains eight chapters and an afterword. Chapter 1 sets up the target: the 'linguistic turn' and the 'conceptual turn'. Chapter 2 takes a philosophical question and attempts to show that it is not 'about' words or concepts, and concludes that virtually no philosophical questions are. Chapters 3-4 examine metaphysical and epistemological conceptions of analyticity to demonstrate that neither can vindicate the idea that philosophy is concerned with conceptual truths rather than 'substantial truths about the world'. Chapters 4-8 investigate knowledge of 'metaphysical modality', the nature of thought experiments, and the evidence for philosophical truths. The afterword is sagaciously entitled 'Must Do Better'.

Three themes dominate the book. First, that it is false that the a priori methodology of philosophy is profoundly unlike the a posteriori methods of natural science; indeed that very distinction allegedly obscures underlying similarities (3). Second, that the difference in subject matter between philosophy and science is less deep than supposed; 'In particular, few philosophical questions are conceptual questions in any distinctive sense' (3). Third, that much contemporary philosophy is vitiated by supposing that evidence in philosophy consists of intuitions, which

successful theory must explain (5). This is one point in Williamson's book which is dead right.

The intellectual virtues and the tools required to engage in philosophy are laid out. We cannot expect to make progress in philosophy unless we are 'working at the highest level of intellectual discipline' (286); we need the unglamorous virtue of patience to write perspicuously – the fear of boring oneself or one's readers is a great enemy of truth (a fear which Williamson ruthlessly masters). Pedantry is a fault on the right side (288). Precision is not a hyper-cautious characteristic – 'It is importantly the opposite' (289). To be precise is to make it as easy as possible for others to prove one wrong – and that is what takes real courage. Rigour and depth both matter, but better to concentrate on rigour, Williamson avers, and leave depth to look after itself (289). The rise of modern logic, from Frege onwards, has provided us with conceptual instruments of unprecedented power and precision (45). Philosophy 'has never been done for an extended period according to standards as high as those that are now available' (291). Progress has at last begun: in many areas of philosophy, we know more in 2007 than was known in 1957. For example, we know much more about possibility and necessity than before the development of modal logic. This triumphant progress, Williamson proclaims in ringing Churchillian tones, 'is not the end of philosophy. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning (292).'

The end of the beginning of philosophy took place in Greece more than 2,000 years ago – in the groves of the Academy and Lyceum, not in the gardens of New College. The title 'The Philosophy of Philosophy' may lead the reader to expect to be shown how leading philosophers engage in the various branches of their subject, such as logic, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, moral, legal and political philosophy, aesthetics, philosophy of science and what they have achieved. But instead of such a rich array of exhibits in the Halls of Philosophy, he will find only a couple of *very* sparsely stocked, dusty showcases on metaphysics and epistemology in an otherwise empty gallery. One might expect a methodical investigation of *how philosophy is actually done* by the most eminent philosophers of the ages, or of the past age, or even just of the present age. But all we are shown is how the current Wykeham Professor of Logic does

philosophy. We are promised insight, rigour and courageous precision, but what we get is tens of pages of reflection on the sentences ‘All vixens are vixens’ and ‘Vixens are female foxes’, coupled with the admonition that ‘impatience with the long haul of technical reflection is a form of shallowness’ (45). The much vaunted conceptual instruments that Frege and subsequent logicians forged as a system of devices to combat woolliness, has (as Ramsey observed elsewhere) become an instrument of scholasticism.

II

Williamson’s central concern is not so much to show how philosophy is done as to show that the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy was wrong. He is eager to prove mistaken the supposition, which characterized analytic philosophy for much of the twentieth century, that philosophy is *sui generis* and radically unlike the sciences. The way in which his own theses about philosophy are established is not primarily by arguing for them, but by attempting to eliminate rival conceptions of the subject. But the different rival conceptions are barely differentiated, and none are accurately described. They are subsumed under something nebulously called ‘the linguistic turn’, and linked with the thought that philosophy is *about* language, or *about* concepts, and that all philosophical truths are *conceptual*.

What, according to Williamson, was ‘the linguistic turn’? For those who took this turn, Williamson explains, ‘language was somehow the central theme of philosophy’ (10). To make the imprecise even more vague, he adds that ‘theme’ does not mean ‘subject matter’; the linguistic turn involved regarding language as ‘somehow central’. Rather than investigating the development of philosophy from the *Tractatus*, through the Vienna Circle, the Cambridge School of analysis, Wittgenstein in the inter-war years, and post-war Oxford philosophy in order to make the epithet ‘linguistic turn’ historically perspicuous, Williamson announces that he will ‘self-indulgently ... use a thin slice through history to introduce the contemporary issues by briefly considering some of my predecessors in the Wykeham Chair of Logic at Oxford (11).’ It is unclear why this is self-indulgent, rather than simply misguided. Consideration of the views of some of his predecessors amounts to

Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* and Dummett's notoriously false claim that according to those who took the linguistic turn, the goal of philosophy is the analysis of the structure of thought, the study of thinking is distinct from the study of thought, and the only method for the analysis of thought is the analysis of language. Citing the first book by the twenty-six-year-old Ayer, fresh from four months in Vienna, and the misconceptions of Dummett, writing about the linguistic turn fifty years later, is hardly a rigorous characterisation of analytic philosophy between the 1920s and 1950s.

Because Evans, Peacocke and Campbell denied the methodological priority of language to thought, Williamson introduces the idea of a 'conceptual turn'. According to him, those who took *this* turn cleaved to the view that the goal of philosophy is the study of the thought, and that the study of the thought is to be distinguished from that of thinking. Since a thought (allegedly) consists of concepts, the study of the thought amounts to the study of concepts. So, according to Williamson, 'conceptual philosophers', by contrast with 'linguistic philosophers', engage in *conceptual philosophy*. One might therefore think that prior to Evans, Peacocke and Campbell, philosophers were *not* engaged in 'conceptual philosophy'. But, in practice, Williamson notes, linguistic philosophers *were* happy to speak of concepts rather than words – but he does not pause to investigate what they meant by 'concepts'. So (apparently) both linguistic philosophers *and* the three minor conceptual philosophers took the conceptual turn. The fact that virtually no 'linguistic philosopher' of the post-war years would have agreed that thoughts (i.e. propositions) have concepts as their constituents is not mentioned. The fact that none of them would have held philosophy to be *the analysis of the structure of thought* (i.e. of the Fregean *Gedanke* or proposition), as Dummett misguidedly put it, is passed over in silence. But Ryle's *Concept of Mind* is not about the structure of the proposition, Hart's *Concept of Law* is about the structure of legal systems, not of thoughts, and Berlin's *Two Concepts of Liberty* is about two conflicting conceptions of liberty. Confused ideas of *conceptual truth*, Williamson alleges, created for linguistic and conceptual philosophers the illusion of a special domain for philosophy, namely: concepts and conceptual truth – and this is what Williamson is keen to eradicate.

One might have hoped that Williamson's account of the progress of twentieth-century analytic philosophy would be lent some precision by a clear statement of what he and his adversaries hold concepts to be, and what he and they deem 'a conceptual truth'. Such hopes are, however, disappointed. Williamson informs us that 'linguistic philosophers' regarded a concept as 'what synonymous words had in common' (14), but that a more standard view of concepts is: 'something like modes of presentation, ways of thinking or speaking, or intellectual capacities' (15). But also 'something like the meaning of a word rather than the word itself', for concepts 'are meanings, or something like them' (29). To make matters clearer and more precise, according to the contemporary meaning of 'concept', concepts are 'something like mental or semantic representations' (30). This multiplicity of non-equivalent misdescriptions of what a concept is, coupled with the smudge-operator 'something like', is hardly a model of fearless precision, logical rigour and semantic sophistication (46). Least of all does it explain what analytic philosophers took concepts to be or what they understood by the claim that philosophy is a conceptual investigation. We can surely, as Williamson urges us in 'Must Do Better' (278-92), do better than that.

The expression 'the linguistic turn' originated with Gustav Bergmann, and was used by Rorty as the title of an eponymous anthology he edited in 1967. He did not mean by 'linguistic turn' the view that 'language was somehow central' to philosophy, but rather the view that philosophical problems may be solved or dissolved either by reforming language (as ideal language philosophers – such as Carnap, and regimenting philosophers, such as Quine, advocated), or by understanding more about the uses of ordinary (i.e. *natural*) languages, as Ryle, Austin and Strawson suggested. Rorty rightly sensed that important developments had occurred in philosophy in the 1920s and 1930s, and again after the war. But Rorty never meant the term 'linguistic turn' to carry *much* weight, and a methodical elucidation of those developments is needed if we are to understand the history of analytic philosophy from 1920 to 1970 in Britain, Germany and Austria, Scandinavia and North America.

Williamson seeks no such understanding and offers no such elucidation. Instead he selects a

test case to show that philosophical questions that are not explicitly but seem implicitly to be *about* thought or language, should nevertheless be taken at face value (Chapter 2).

III

Given the supposition that Mars was once wet and gradually became dry, is the question ‘*Was Mars always either dry or not dry?*’ about language (words) or thought (concepts)? Admitting that ‘about’ is not a precise term, Williamson says that a sentence is about whatever its constituents refer to in context. So this sentence is about Mars, and not about language (26; 30f.). But one might object that, given that ‘about’ is indeed imprecise, the question *in this context* is about vague predicates – and so it *is* about language; or that it is about the law of excluded middle and its application to vague predicates and hence about logic *and* language; or that if the question really were about Mars, one could answer it by investigating Mars – but one can’t, so it isn’t. Williamson says that we cannot answer the question by examining the use of vague words – what we must do is assess rival theories of vagueness. No reason is given for this. In fact, recourse to contentious *philosophical theories* is neither necessary nor desirable. What is needed is a little thought about language, and some scrutiny of linguistic use. A vague predicate is one characterized by borderline cases to which the predicate’s application is indeterminate. So the answer to the question, given the assumption of the gradual drying out of Mars, is patently ‘No’ or ‘No, not exactly’ – competent speakers, who have mastered the use of ‘dry’ may legitimately disagree among themselves about its application; individual speakers may be inconsistent in their successive applications of the predicate to borderline cases; they may rationally respond to the question by a shift in concepts (e.g. ‘It wasn’t actually *wet* anymore, but there was still some water around’). So, given the assumption of gradual dehydration, Mars was not always either dry or not dry, since there were times in which neither ‘dry’ nor ‘not dry’ could correctly be applied to Mars. The question is answered by reflecting on the use of vague words. Williamson, however, thinks the answer is ‘Yes’ – since ‘Mars was always dry or not dry’ is a logical truth, being a generalization of instances of the law of excluded middle for various times.

But the law of excluded middle merely offers us a diptych, which has no application to borderline cases. The calculus of logic, as Frege knew well, fits ill the vague predicates of natural language – and so much the worse for the calculus as an instrument to grasp the character of language. Of course, Frege would have agreed to this too; the reason he invented his calculus was not to describe the grammar of natural languages.

It is unclear why Williamson thinks that his answer shows that virtually *no* philosophical questions are ‘linguistic’ or ‘conceptual’. Williamson’s question, given the assumption, *is* about vague predicates and their use. But more significant philosophical questions such as ‘Why is ignorance a state, whereas knowledge is not?’, ‘Are reasons causes?’, ‘Do we have an immortal soul?’, ‘Is the will free?’, ‘Is life of intrinsic value? – are patently questions about knowledge and ignorance, states and mental states, reasons and causes, the soul and immortality, freedom of the will and intrinsic value. Equally patently, they are also about the concepts of knowledge, ignorance, states, reasons, etc. And since there is no investigating concepts other than by investigating the uses of words that express them, these questions are about words and their use. In short, ‘about’ is no jack with which to lift the damaged vehicle of current philosophy. One must *look and see* how philosophy is actually done.

IV

Having shown to his satisfaction that philosophical truths are not generally *about* words or concepts, Williamson queries how philosophy might *nevertheless* still be an armchair activity that aims at conceptual truths. Since confinement to an armchair does not deprive one of one’s linguistic competence, perhaps conceptual truths are those that can be achieved merely through reflection on that competence. This might be so, he writes (50f.), if all, or all core, philosophical truths were analytic in some sense that imposed no constraints upon the world and hence could be known from the depths of an armchair. Williamson suggests that this view was embraced by those analytic philosophers who believed that philosophical truths are linguistic or conceptual. But this is

demonstrably false. Among Oxford philosophers who ‘took the linguistic turn’, the only significant one who thought that all philosophical propositions are analytic was Ayer (at the age of 26). The Manifesto of the Vienna Circle followed Wittgenstein in denying that there *are* any philosophical propositions. Ryle, Austin, Strawson and others did think there are, but nowhere suggested that they are analytic. *All* insisted that philosophy is a conceptual investigation, but none held that its task is to disclose analytic truths. It is therefore astonishing that Williamson *decides* to use ‘analytic’ and ‘conceptual’ interchangeably (50). So, conceptual truths are analytic, according to Williamson. This is not only historically unwarranted, it is also arguably philosophically misconceived. Such philosophical assertions as ‘Idealism and materialism are both answers to an improper question’ (Ryle), ‘Material objects and persons are the basic particulars of our conceptual scheme’ (Strawson), or ‘There can be no such thing as a “private language”’ (Wittgenstein) are not analytic, and their proponents did not hold them to be. But they are conceptual truths.

Labouring under the misconception that the claim that philosophy is a conceptual investigation commits its proponents to the view that philosophical conclusions are analytic truths, Williamson explores two different conceptions of analyticity in the attempt to show that neither can support the idea that the ‘conceptual turn’ was warranted (Chapters 3-4).⁶ One conception of analyticity he dubs ‘metaphysical’. A truth is *metaphysically analytic* if it is true in virtue of its meaning alone. It is *metaphysically analytic* because necessarily in any context any sentence with that meaning is true, i.e. it is ‘modal-analytic’ (60). But, Williamson protests, this does not support

⁶ Surprisingly, Williamson thinks that it is due to Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity* (1972) that we do not assimilate the analytic, the a priori and the necessary (51). But Kant would not have dreamt of *assimilating* the distinctions he drew, and neither would Frege, who held that arithmetic is analytic, geometry synthetic a priori, and that both consist of necessary truths. Although one of Williamson’s predecessors in the Wykeham Chair of Logic confused and conflated the three distinctions in *Language, Truth and Logic*, he was duly taken to task in the Kneales’ *The Development of Logic* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1962), who pointed out that these distinctions are neither synonymous nor co-extensive (p. 673). Had Kripke wanted to find out more prior to delivering his lectures, he could have consulted Hamlyn’s entries in Edward’s *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (1967).

the case of his imaginary adversaries that analytic truths are ‘insubstantial’. For, he contends, ‘For any true sentence *s* whatsoever, a canonical explanation of the truth of *s* takes the overall form “*s* means that *P*, and *P*”’ (59). So, a metaphysically analytic proposition such as ‘Vixens are foxes’ is allegedly true in virtue of its meaning alone, i.e. ‘Vixens are foxes’ means that vixens are foxes – that’s why it is true! But, Williamson objects, this explanation works only when we take it for granted that vixens *are* foxes, since that ‘Vixens are foxes’ means that vixens are foxes does not *show* that it is true that vixens are foxes. *Every* true sentence, he insists (like Quine), is true in virtue *both* of its meaning *and* of how things are. So, the metaphysical explanation of analyticity does not show that an analytic truth is insubstantial – that vixens are foxes may, for all that has been said, ‘express a profound metaphysical necessity about the nature of the world, knowable ... only through arduous a posteriori investigation’ (61).

Williamson’s riposte imputes to his imaginary opponents the idea that any sentence means the state of affairs it describes, and hence that an analytic sentence ‘*p*’ means that *p*, and is true simply in virtue of what it means. But this is mistaken. Moreover, no one who defended the idea that philosophy is a conceptual investigation, and no one who thought that philosophical truths are conceptual, and not even the few who thought that philosophical propositions *are* analytic, supposed that a sentence ‘*p*’ means that *p*. This is a misconception foisted on us by Quine and Davidson. ‘Vixen’ certainly means the same as ‘female fox’, and by the word ‘vixen’, a speaker may have meant a female fox. Similarly, *by* the sentence ‘Vixens are female foxes’, a speaker normally means that vixens are females foxes. But the *sentence* ‘Vixens are female foxes’ *does not mean* that vixens are female foxes, although if someone utters it, that very likely means that he knows English.⁷

Williamson’s argument relies on the premise that any sentence means what it describes – but that is false. Further, it depends uncritically upon Quine’s implausible idea that every true sentence is true in virtue both of its meaning and of how things are. But there are well-known objections to

⁷ Bede Rundle, *Grammar in Philosophy* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1979), §53.

saying that *sentences* are true or false, and the truth of *what is said by the use of a sentence* may be wholly independent of the way things are – as is the truth of tautologies, which are true no matter how things are. Williamson’s argument also depends on the view that the equivalence of ‘*p*’ with ‘It is true that *p*’ purports to *explain* the truth of ‘*p*’ (i.e. to explain *why* it is true that *p*) as opposed to explaining what it is for it to be true. Further, it misguidedly relies on the assumption that analyticity is a property of type-sentences, rather than of their uses. But whether a sentence expresses an analytic truth, e.g. in Newtonian mechanics, often varies from argument to argument, and must be examined from case to case since what counts as constitutive and what as inductive grounds commonly fluctuates. Moreover, Williamson confuses the claim that an analytic proposition is true in virtue of the meanings of the words in the sentence expressing it (an unhappy formulation which some philosophers embraced and Wittgenstein criticised) with the different claim, which no one made, that an analytic sentence ‘*p*’ is true in virtue of its meaning that *p*. Finally, it is evident that to know that vixens are female foxes one need not engage in ‘arduous a posteriori investigation’. But that, according to Williamson, has nothing to do with conceptual links between understanding this proposition and knowing that it is true – which is the theme of chapter 4.

A truth is *epistemologically analytic*, according to Williamson, if understanding it is sufficient for assenting to it. Failure to assent to such a truth is, on Williamson’s construal of his adversaries, *constitutive of*, not merely *good evidence for*, failure to understand it. So, ‘Necessarily, whoever understands the sentence “Every vixen is a female fox” assents to it’ (73). Williamson sets out to consider rigorously whether such truths can be known simply on the basis of linguistic competence, for that would explain how philosophy can both be an armchair science and attain ‘substantial knowledge’ (e.g. about vixens, namely: that they are female foxes). He cites the Grice-Strawson response to Quine, in which they asserted that we would not understand someone who said ‘My neighbour’s three-year-old child is an adult’ and, after some enquiries, would conclude that he did not understand what he was saying either. But, Williamson remonstrates, someone may believe that normal humans attain maturity at three, explaining away contrary evidence by *ad hoc* hypotheses

or conspiracy theories. Even ‘Every vixen is a vixen’, he claims, might be denied by someone who took universal quantification to be existentially committing and who believed that there are no vixens, all apparent evidence to the contrary being planted by MI 6, and all fox-hunts being hallucinations (87). Equally it might be denied by a metaphysician who denies that macroscopic objects exist because then they would be vague and that is metaphysically impossible (87n.). (This exemplifies the manner in which rigour and precision require the playful use of the imagination to think up amusing counter-examples of exactly the right structure to challenge a generalization (289)!) We may shortcut Williamson’s further elaboration, since these cases are beside the point.

Grice and Strawson did not assert that failure to assent to an analytic truth is constitutive of failure to understand it. Rather, they wrote, we may ask whether the speaker Y, who asserts that his neighbour’s three-year-old child is an adult, means that the child is uncommonly sensible, or very advanced for his age, or that he won’t grow any more, or that he is a freak of some sort and is already fully developed. If Y denies all these options, then ‘At this stage – or possibly if we are patient a little later – we shall be inclined to say that we just don’t understand what Y is saying, and to suspect that he just does not know the meaning of some of the words he is using ... [and whatever emerges] it will not lead us to say that what Y said was literally true, but that we now see what he meant.’⁸ Williamson’s far-fetched examples of certifiable metaphysicians and lunatic logicians are irrelevant to the Grice-Strawson claim that analytic truths are such that denying what is asserted by their use is a defeasible *logical criterion* of not understanding them.

Recourse to analyticity and to conceptual truth having been rejected, how *can* armchair activity lead to ‘substantive knowledge of the world’? We should be open, Williamson avers, ‘to the idea that thinking, just as much as perceiving, is a way of learning how things are. Even if one does not fully understand *how* thinking can provide new knowledge, the cases of logic and mathematics constitute overwhelming evidence that it does so’ (47). But, one must surely remonstrate, whatever

⁸ H. P. Grice and P. F. Strawson, ‘In Defense of a Dogma’, repr. in Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1989), p. 205.

knowledge logic and mathematics yield, it is not ‘substantive knowledge of the world’.

If philosophy does not result in conceptual truths ‘in any useful sense’, is it not at any rate an a priori investigation? Williamson concedes that the method of philosophy is a priori. But the distinction between a priori and a posteriori knowledge, he claims, obscures fundamental similarities between philosophical and scientific knowledge (3). The distinction is too crude to be of much epistemological use and out of place in ‘a deeper theoretical analysis’ (169). The reason is that ‘individual differences in the skill with which concepts are applied [e.g. in holding that knowledge implies belief] depend constitutively, not just causally, on past experience . . . In a similar way, past experiences of spatial and temporal properties may play a role in skilful mathematical “intuition” that is not directly evidential but far exceeds what is needed to acquire the relevant mathematical concepts (168f.).’ So, it is best to speak not crudely of ‘a priori knowledge’, but rather, with refinement, of ‘armchair knowledge’. In armchair knowledge, experience plays no strictly evidential role, but it *may* be far more than enabling, and we *may* ‘turn out to have armchair knowledge of truths about the external environment’ (169) – but no examples of such knowledge are offered, and no explanation is given to render the ‘mays’ precise. However, all this is surely irrelevant to the question of whether, as Frege put it, the truth of a known judgement can be proven without including an appeal to facts.⁹

The remainder of the book is given over to showing that our capacity to know what is ‘metaphysical necessary’ is no different from our capacity to know the truth of counterfactuals; that the most conspicuous method of philosophy is the thought experiment, paradigm thought experiments being no more than valid arguments about counterfactual possibilities (207). Philosophy, like any other science (including mathematics), Williamson avers, has evidence for its discoveries. Evidence for philosophical discoveries is provided in principle by whatever we know (277).

Space precludes consideration of Williamson’s arguments on these latter themes. I note merely that thought experiments are no more experiments than monopoly money is money; that the

⁹ G. Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1959 (1884)), §3

fact that Galileo and Einstein engaged in thought experiments does not make metaphysics any more akin to science than to chess or cricket (in which one may also reflect on what would happen or would have happened if ...); and that a proof in mathematics is not *evidence* for the theorem proved. The supposition that there can be empirical evidence for a conceptual truth is akin to the belief that empirical evidence can confirm a mathematical theorem – a view made popular by John Stuart Mill and refuted by Frege.

V

So, at the end of the day, what is the conception of philosophy that Williamson has to offer? Philosophy, he informs us, is *an armchair science* (4). It consists of thinking, without any special interaction with the world beyond the armchair, such as measurement, observation or experiment would typically involve (1). It consists of thinking *very hard* ('the unusually systematic and unrelenting application of ways of thinking required over a vast range of non-philosophical inquiry' (3)). But although philosophy *can* be done in an armchair, it need not be (and, Williamson notes coyly, he has even done some *experimental philosophy* himself (6 n.1)).¹⁰ Philosophical questions are those that philosophers are disposed to ask. These questions are more amenable to philosophical ways of thinking than other ways of thinking; but since philosophical ways of thinking are no different in kind from other ways, philosophical questions are not different in kind from other questions (4). Most importantly, philosophy is no more a linguistic or conceptual inquiry than physics (21). With this rigour and exactness, all is clear.

What then are the substantive truths about the world that philosophers may discover? According to Williamson, 'Much contemporary metaphysics is not primarily concerned with thought or language at all. Its goal is to discover what fundamental kinds of things there are and what properties and relations they have, not to study the structure of our thought about them' (19).

¹⁰ Williamson refers us to an article entitled 'On the psychology of vague predicates', *Mind and Language* 14 (1999), 377-93, of which he was co-author. Why a paper on the psychology of vague predicates should be an experimental form of philosophy is opaque.

‘Contemporary metaphysics studies substances and essences, universals and particulars, space and time, possibility and necessity’ (ibid.). So, while physicists busy themselves discovering the ultimate particles of matter, confirming their discoveries by observation and experiment, and inventing technologies on the basis of their discoveries, meta-physicists discover that there are universals (which they have been doing for over 2,000 years) – or that there are no universals (which they have also been doing for over 2,000 years), and invent possible worlds (which do not exist). Or they ‘discover’ that truths that chemists have discovered, e.g. that water consists of H₂O, are metaphysically necessary. Or they discover, as Professor Williamson has, that the ‘metaphysical’ truth that necessarily all vixens are vixens can be both understood and denied – if one suffers from clinically certifiable delusions.

The Philosophy of Philosophy fails to characterize the linguistic turn in analytic philosophy. It fails to explain why many of the greatest analytic philosophers thought philosophy to be a conceptual investigation. It does not explain what a conceptual truth is or was taken to be, but mistakenly assimilates conceptual truths to analytic ones. It holds that philosophy can discover truths about reality by reflection alone, but does not explain how. It holds that some philosophical truths are confirmable by experiments, but does not say which. It misrepresents the methodology of the empirical sciences and the differences between the sciences and philosophy. It has nothing whatsoever to say about most branches of philosophy. But it does provide an adequate ‘self-image’ of the way Professor Williamson does philosophy.

St John’s College, Oxford