



The philosophy of philosophy

Timothy Williamson.

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Timothy Williamson

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To my children Alice, Conrad, and Arno

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## Preface

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This book grew out of a sense that contemporary philosophy lacks a self-image that does it justice. Of the self-images that philosophy inherited from the twentieth century, the most prominent – naturalism, the linguistic turn, postmodern irony, and so on – seemed obviously inadequate to most of the most interesting work in contemporary philosophy: as descriptions, false when bold, uninformative when cautious. Less prominent alternatives too seemed implausible or ill-developed. Although an adequate self-image is not a precondition of all virtue, it helps. If philosophy misconceives what it is doing, it is likely to do it worse. In any case, an adequate self-image is worth having for its own sake; we are not supposed to be leading the unexamined life. This is my attempt to do better.

I considered using the phrase “philosophical method” in the title, but decided against on the grounds that it seemed to promise something more like a recipe for doing philosophy than I believe possible. When asked for advice on some occasion, the Duke of Wellington is said to have replied “Sir, you are in a devilish awkward predicament, and must get out of it as best you can.” My advice would be scarcely more useful. At the crucial point, I can only say “Use your judgment.” The primary task of the philosophy of science is to understand science, not to give scientists advice. Likewise, the primary task of the philosophy of philosophy is to understand philosophy, not to give philosophers advice – although I have not rigorously abstained from the latter.

I also rejected the word “metaphilosophy.” The philosophy of philosophy is automatically part of philosophy, just as the philosophy of anything else is, whereas metaphilosophy sounds as though it might try to look down on philosophy from above, or beyond. One

reason for the survival of implausible self-images of philosophy is that they have been insufficiently scrutinized as pieces of philosophy. Passed down as though they were platitudes, they often embody epistemologically or logically naïve presuppositions. The philosophy of philosophy is no easier than the philosophy of science. And like the philosophy of science, it can only be done well by those with some respect for what they are studying.

The book makes no claim to comprehensiveness. For example, it does not engage in detail with critics of analytic philosophy who do not engage with it in detail. I preferred to follow a few lines of thought that I found more rewarding. I hope that philosophy as I have presented it seems worth doing and not impossibly difficult. At any rate, I enjoy it.

## Acknowledgments

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My three Blackwell/Brown lectures, given at Brown University in September 2005, constituted the occasion for the book, although the material has evolved considerably since then. I thank both Blackwell Publishing and Brown University for the invitation and their generous hospitality. Jeff Dean at Blackwell has been a helpful and supportive editor.

My further debts of gratitude are huge. An earlier version of some of the material was presented as the Jack Smart Lecture at the Australian National University in July 2005. Various later versions were presented as four Anders Wedberg Lectures at the University of Stockholm in April 2006, where the commentators were Kathrin Glüer-Pagin, Sören Häggqvist, Anna-Sara Malmgren and Åsa Wikforss, as eight José Gaos Lectures at the Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in September–October 2006, and as three Carl G. Hempel Lectures at Princeton University in December 2006. Other occasions on which the material in one form or another came under scrutiny included a week-long graduate course at the University of Bologna in May–June 2005, a week-long Kompaktseminar at the University of Heidelberg in February 2006, three lectures I gave as the Townsend Visitor in Philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley, in September 2006, a lecture and workshop at the University of Munich in June 2005, two lectures I gave as Tang Chun-I Visiting Professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in March 2007, and lectures at a graduate conference on epistemology at the University of Rochester in September 2004, where Richard Feldman was the commentator, the University of Arizona, Tucson, and the University of California, Los Angeles, and a meeting of the Aristotelian Society (my Presidential

Address) in October 2004, a workshop on the epistemology of philosophy at the University of Bristol in May 2005, a conference on philosophical methodology at the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University in July 2005, a conference on philosophical knowledge in Erfurt, and at Rutgers University in September 2005, the University of Warwick in November 2005, an Arché workshop on modality at the University of St Andrews in December 2005, a workshop on metaphysics at the University of Nottingham in January 2006, the first conference of the Dutch-Flemish Society for Analytic Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam and the University of Leeds in March 2006, the Universities of Turin and Milan, the “Is there anything wrong with Wittgenstein?” conference in Reggio Emilia and the third conference of the Portuguese Society for Analytic Philosophy at the University of Lisbon in June 2006, the Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association at the University of Southampton in July 2006 (my address as President of the Mind Association), the GAP.6 conference of the German Society for Analytic Philosophy and the subsequent workshop on Implicit Definitions and A Priori Knowledge, where Frank Hofmann was the commentator, at the Free University of Berlin in September 2006, the University of Santiago de Compostela in November 2006, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, for which Gillian Russell was the commentator, in December 2006, the Royal Institute of Philosophy and the University of Calgary in February 2007, and the University of Cambridge in June 2007. I presented still earlier versions of the ideas at a workshop on intuition and epistemology at the University of Fribourg, where Manuel García Carpintero was the commentator, a conference on modalism and mentalism in contemporary epistemology hosted by Aarhus University at the Carlsberg Academy in Copenhagen, a conference in the Centre for Advanced Studies at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters in Oslo, which also hosted me for a term of leave in the summer of 2004, a workshop at the University of Amiens on John Cook Wilson and Oxford realism, a conference on externalism, phenomenology, and understanding in memory of Greg McCulloch at the Institute of Philosophy in the University of London’s School of Advanced Study, a summer school on epistemology at the Sorbonne, and a conference on meaning and truth at St Andrews, and talks at the universities

of Bilkent, Edinburgh, Michigan, Minnesota, Padua, Rijeka, and Stirling. Most of the material has also been presented in classes and discussion groups at Oxford. Much of the development of themes in this book was provoked by reflection on the questions and objections raised on these occasions. It would be hopeless to try to enumerate the questioners and objectors, but they may be able to trace their influence.

Those who have helped with discussion or written comments outside the occasions above include Alexander Bird, Stephan Blatti, Davor Bodrožić, Berit Brogaard, Earl Conee, Keith DeRose, Dorothy Edgington, Pascal Engel, Tamar Szabó Gendler, Olav Gjelsvik, John Hawthorne, Thomas Kroedel, Brian Leftow, Brian Leiter, Peter Lipton, Ofra Magidor, Mike Martin, Nenad Mišćević, Michael Pendlebury, Oliver Pooley, Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, Helge Rückert, Joe Salerno, Laura Schroeter, Nico Silins, Jason Stanley, Scott Sturgeon, Hamid Vahid, Alberto Voltolini, and Ralph Wedgwood. John Hawthorne, Joshua Schechter, and two referees read the book in manuscript and provided comments on which I drew extensively during the final revisions.

That list of acknowledgements is undoubtedly incomplete: special thanks to those who have been undeservedly omitted.

The book is based on a series of articles in which earlier versions of the ideas were formulated, although hardly any pages have survived completely unchanged. Chapters 1 and 2 derive from “Past the Linguistic Turn?,” in *The Future for Philosophy*, edited by Brian Leiter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 106–28. Most of Chapter 3 is new. The first section of Chapter 3 and much of Chapter 4 constitute an expanded version of “Conceptual Truth,” *Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume 80 (2006), pp. 1–41, with much new material (for example, on tacit knowledge and on normative conceptions of analyticity); the germ is to be found in “Understanding and Inference,” *Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume 77 (2003), pp. 249–93. Chapters 5 and 6 derive from an initial sketch in my Presidential Address to the Aristotelian Society, “Armchair Philosophy, Metaphysical Modality and Counterfactual Thinking,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, volume 105 (2005): 1–23. An intermediate step on the way to Chapter 5 was “Philosophical Knowledge and Knowledge of Counterfactuals,” *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, volume 74 (2007): 89–123, also

appearing as *Philosophical Knowledge – Its Possibility and Scope*, edited by Christian Beyer and Alex Burri (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), the proceedings of the Erfurt conference on philosophical knowledge. Chapters 7 and 8 derive from “Philosophical ‘Intuitions’ and Scepticism about Judgement,” *Dialectica* 58 (2004), pp. 109–53; the volume constitutes the proceedings of the workshop on intuition and epistemology at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, in November 2002 (the talk I gave there is not recognizable in this book; I gave it to make myself think seriously about the topic). Chapter 7 in particular has been greatly expanded; sections 1 and 7 are new; the probabilistic material in section 4 is expanded from pp. 683–5 of “Knowledge and Scepticism,” *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy*, edited by Frank Jackson and Michael Smith, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 681–700. The Afterword is a slightly modified version of “Must Do Better,” in *Truth and Realism*, edited by Patrick Greenough and Michael Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2006), pp. 177–87; the volume constitutes the proceedings of the St Andrews conference on meaning and truth.

Thanks above all to my wife Ana, who does not let me forget what matters.

## Introduction

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What can be pursued in an armchair?

Every armchair pursuit raises the question whether its methods are adequate to its aims. The traditional methods of philosophy are armchair ones: they consist of thinking, without any special interaction with the world beyond the chair, such as measurement, observation or experiment would typically involve. To do justice to the social and not solely individual nature of philosophy, as a dialectic between several parties, we should add speaking and listening to thinking, and allow several armchairs, within earshot of each other, but methodologically that brings philosophy little closer to the natural sciences. For good or ill, few philosophers show much appetite for the risky business of making predictions and testing them against observation, whether or not their theories in fact have consequences that could be so tested. Without attempting to define the terms precisely, we may put the difference to a first approximation thus: the current methodology of the natural sciences is *a posteriori*; the current methodology of philosophy is *a priori*. What should we make of this difference?

Opposite reactions are possible. *Crude rationalists* regard philosophy’s *a priori* methodology as a virtue. According to them, it makes philosophical results especially reliable, because immune from perceptual error. *Crude empiricists* regard philosophy’s *a priori* methodology as a vice. According to them, it makes philosophical results especially unreliable, because immune from perceptual correction.

Few contemporary philosophers have the nerve to be crude rationalists. Given the apparent absence of a substantial body of agreed results in philosophy, crude rationalism is not easy to maintain. Many contemporary philosophers have some sympathy for crude empiri-



cism, particularly when it goes under the more acceptable name of “naturalism.” However, that sympathy sometimes has little effect on their philosophical practice: they still philosophize in the grand old manner, merely adding naturalism to their list of *a priori* commitments.

A subtler response to naturalism, or empiricism, is to scale down the ambitions of philosophy. Holding fixed its *a priori* methodology, one asks what it could be good for. Not for answering ordinary factual questions, it is claimed: that is best left to the natural sciences with their *a posteriori* methodology. Nevertheless, what we already have in the armchair is the intellectual equipment we bring to *a posteriori* inquiry, our conceptual or linguistic competence. Perhaps philosophy can find some sort of legitimate employment by investigating, from within, what we bring to inquiry. Rather than trying to answer ordinary factual questions, it seeks to understand the very possibility of asking them – in some way, yet to be properly specified, that does not involve asking ordinary factual questions about the possibility of asking ordinary factual questions. The “linguistic turn” in twentieth-century philosophy comprises a variety of attempts in that general spirit. Since confinement to an armchair does not deprive one of one’s linguistic competence, whatever can be achieved through exercise of that competence and reflection thereon will be a feasible goal for philosophy. If one regards thought as constituting a more fundamental level of analysis than language, one may generalize the linguistic turn to the “conceptual turn,” and consider what can be achieved through exercise of our conceptual competence and reflection thereon, but the outcome will be broadly similar: philosophical questions turn out to be in some sense conceptual questions.

Crude rationalists, crude empiricists, and linguistic or conceptual philosophers (those who take the linguistic or conceptual turn) share a common assumption: that the *a priori* methodology of philosophy is profoundly unlike the *a posteriori* methodology of the natural sciences; it is no mere difference between distinct applications of the same underlying methodology. One apparently distinctive feature of current methodology in the broad tradition known as “analytic philosophy” is the appeal to *intuition*. Crude rationalists postulate a special knowledge-generating faculty of rational intuition. Crude empiricists regard “intuition” as an obscurantist term for folk prejudice, a psychological or social phenomenon that cannot legitimately

constrain truth-directed inquiry. Linguistic or conceptual philosophers treat intuitions more sympathetically, as the deliverances of linguistic or conceptual competence. Of course, the appeal to intuitions also plays a crucial role in the overt methodology of other disciplines too, such as linguistics.

One main theme of this book is that the common assumption of philosophical exceptionalism is false. Even the distinction between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* turns out to obscure underlying similarities. Although there are real methodological differences between philosophy and the other sciences, as actually practiced, they are less deep than is often supposed. In particular, so-called intuitions are simply judgments (or dispositions to judgment); neither their content nor the cognitive basis on which they are made need be distinctively philosophical. In general, the methodology of much past and present philosophy consists in just the unusually systematic and unrelenting application of ways of thinking required over a vast range of non-philosophical inquiry. The philosophical applications inherit a moderate degree of reliability from the more general cognitive patterns they instantiate. Although we cannot prove, from a starting-point a sufficiently radical skeptic would accept, that those ways of thinking are truth-conducive, the same holds of *all* ways of thinking, including the methods of natural science. That is the skeptic’s problem, not ours. By more discriminating standards, the methodology of philosophy is not in principle problematic.

Some may wonder whether philosophy *has* a method to be studied, especially if it is as methodologically undistinctive as just suggested. Forget the idea of a single method, employed in all and only philosophical thinking. Still, philosophers use methods of various kinds: they philosophize in various ways. A philosophical community’s methodology is its repertoire of such methods. The word “method” here carries no implication of a mechanically applicable algorithm, guaranteed to yield a result within a finite time. On this loose understanding of what a methodology is, it is disingenuous for a philosopher to claim to have none.

Another main theme of this book is that the differences in subject matter between philosophy and the other sciences are also less deep than is often supposed. In particular, few philosophical questions are conceptual questions in any distinctive sense, except when philosophers choose to ask questions about concepts, as they may but need

not do. Philosophical questions are those philosophers are disposed to ask, which in turn tend, unsurprisingly, to be those more amenable to philosophical than to other ways of thinking; since the philosophical ways of thinking are not different in kind from the other ways, it is equally unsurprising that philosophical questions are not different in kind from other questions. Of course, philosophers are especially fond of abstract, general, necessary truths, but that is only an extreme case of a set of intellectual drives present to some degree in all disciplines.

In most particular cases, philosophers experience little difficulty in recognizing the difference between philosophy and non-philosophy. Being philosophers, they care about the difference, and have a professional temptation to represent it as a deep philosophical one. But just about every institutionally distinct discipline acquires a professional identity, and its practitioners experience little difficulty in recognizing the difference between what “we” do and what “they” do in most particular cases. They care about the difference, and have a professional temptation to represent it in the terms of their own discipline. But such temptations can be resisted. The distinction between the Department of Philosophy and the Department of Linguistics or the Department of Biology is clearer than the distinction between philosophy and linguistics or biology; the philosophy of language overlaps the semantics of natural languages and the philosophy of biology overlaps evolutionary theory.

The unexceptional nature of philosophy is easier to discern if we avoid the philistine emphasis on a few natural sciences, often imagined in crudely stereotyped ways that marginalize the role of armchair methods in those sciences. Not all science is natural science. Whatever crude empiricists may say, mathematics is a science if anything is; it is done in an armchair if anything is. In no useful sense are mathematical questions conceptual questions. If mathematics is an armchair science, why not philosophy too?

Most philosophers are neither crude rationalists nor crude empiricists nor, these days, linguistic or conceptual philosophers. Many would accept the theses just enunciated about the methodology and subject matter of philosophy. But a third theme of this book is that the current philosophical mainstream has failed to articulate an adequate philosophical methodology, in part because it has fallen into

the classic epistemological error of psychologizing the data. For example, our evidence is sometimes presented as consisting of our intuitions: not their content, since it is allowed that some of our intuitions may be false, but rather our psychological states of having those intuitions. We are then supposed to infer to the philosophical theory that best explains the evidence. But since it is allowed that philosophical questions are typically not psychological questions, the link between the philosophical theory of a non-psychological subject matter and the psychological evidence that it is supposed to explain becomes problematic: the description of the methodology makes the methodology hard to sustain. Again, philosophy is often presented as systematizing and stabilizing our beliefs, bringing them into reflective equilibrium: the picture is that in doing philosophy what we have to go on is what our beliefs currently are, as though our epistemic access were only to those belief states and not to the states of the world that they are about. The picture is wrong; we frequently have better epistemic access to our immediate physical environment than to our own psychology. A popular remark is that we have no choice but to start from where we are, with our current beliefs. But where we are is not only having various beliefs about the world; it is also having significant knowledge of the world. Starting from where we are involves starting from what we already know, and the goal is to know more (of course, how much more we come to know cannot be measured just by the number of propositions learnt). To characterize our method as one of achieving reflective equilibrium is to fail to engage with epistemologically crucial features of our situation. Our understanding of philosophical methodology must be rid of internalist preconceptions.

Philosophical errors distort our conception of philosophy in other ways too. Confused and obscure ideas of conceptual truth create the illusion of a special domain for philosophical investigation. Similarly, although perception clearly involves causal interaction between perceiver and perceived, crudely causal accounts of perceptual knowledge that occlude the contribution of background theory create the illusion of a contrast between world-dependent empirical beliefs and world-independent philosophical theory.

Clearly, the investigation of philosophical methodology cannot and should not be philosophically neutral. It is just more philosophy,

turned on philosophy itself. We have the philosophy of mathematics, the philosophy of physics, the philosophy of biology, the philosophy of economics, the philosophy of history; we also need the philosophy of philosophy.

The rethinking of philosophical methodology in this book involves understanding, at an appropriate level of abstraction, how philosophy is actually done. Philosophers of science know the dangers of moralizing from first principles on how a discipline should ideally be pursued without respecting how it currently is pursued; the same lesson applies to the philosophy of philosophy. The present opposition to philosophical exceptionalism is far from involving the idea that philosophers should model themselves on physicists or biologists. The denial that philosophical questions are conceptual questions is quite compatible with a heavy emphasis on issues of semantic structure in philosophical discussion, for the validity or otherwise of philosophical reasoning is often highly sensitive to delicate aspects of the semantic structure of premises and conclusion: to make our reasoning instruments more reliable, we must investigate those instruments themselves, even when they are not the ultimate objects of our concern.

That philosophy *can* be done in an armchair does not entail that it *must* be done in an armchair.<sup>1</sup> This book raises no objection to the idea that the results of scientific experiments are sometimes directly relevant to philosophical questions: for example, concerning the philosophy of time. But it is a fallacy to infer that philosophy can nowhere usefully proceed until the experiments are done. In this respect, philosophy is similar to mathematics. Scientific experiments can be relevant to mathematical questions. For instance, a physical theory may entail that there are physically instantiated counterexamples to a mathematical theory. A toy example: one can specify in physical terms what it takes to be an inscription (intended or unintended) in a given font of a proof of “ $0 = 1$ ” in a given formal system of Peano Arithmetic; a physical theory could predict that an event of a specified physically possible type would cause there to be

such an inscription. Less directly, psychological experiments might in principle reveal levels of human unreliability in proof-checking that would undermine current mathematical practice. To conclude on that basis alone that mathematics should become an experimental discipline would be hopelessly naïve. In practice, most of mathematics will and should remain an armchair discipline, even though it is not in principle insulated from experimental findings, because armchair methods, specifically proof, remain by far the most reliable and efficient available. Although the matter is less clear-cut, something similar may well apply to many areas of philosophy, for instance, philosophical logic. In particular, on the account in this book, the method of conducting opinion polls among non-philosophers is not very much more likely to be the best way of answering philosophical questions than the method of conducting opinion polls among non-physicists is to be the best way of answering physical questions.

Although this book is a defense of armchair philosophy, it is not written in a purely conservative spirit. Our ideas about philosophical methodology, however inchoate, are liable to influence the methodology we actually employ; bad ideas about it are liable to tilt it in bad directions. A reasonable hypothesis is that our current methodology is good enough to generate progress in philosophy, but not by much: ten steps forward, nine steps back. Nevertheless, we can improve our performance even without radically new methods. We need to apply the methods we already have with more patience and better judgment. A small increase in accuracy of measurement may enable scientists to tackle problems previously beyond reach, because their data lacked sufficient resolution. Similarly, small improvements in accepted standards of reasoning may enable the philosophical community to reach knowledgeable agreement on the status of many more arguments. Such incremental progress in philosophical methodology is a realistic prospect, for current standards in the profession exhibit large variations significantly correlated with differences between graduate schools. Philosophical methodology can be taught – mainly by example, but fine-tuning by explicit precept and discussion also makes a difference. For instance, the level of rigor in philosophical statement and argument which Frege achieved only by genius (with a little help from his mathematical training) is now available to hundreds of graduate students every year: and we know how to do even better. That is not to imply, of course, that we must strive for maximum

<sup>1</sup> In this respect Hilary Kornblith seems to misunderstand the claim that philosophy can be done in an armchair (2006: 19). I have even dabbled in experimental philosophy myself (Bonini, Osherson, Viale and Williamson 1999).

rigor at all times, otherwise this impressionistic introduction would be self-defeating. At any rate, if the philosophical community has the will, it can gradually bring up a much higher proportion of practice to the standard of current best practice, and beyond. Such progress in methodology cannot be relied on to happen automatically; not all of us love the highest at first sight. Although the envisaged incremental progress lacks the drama after which some philosophers still hanker, that hankering is itself a symptom of the intellectual immaturity that helps hold philosophy back. No revelation is at hand; any improvement in accepted standards of philosophical discussion will result from collective hard work and self-discipline. One hope with which this book is written is that by contributing to the current tendency towards increasing methodological self-consciousness in philosophy it will play some role, however indirect, in raising those standards. Philosophizing is not like riding a bicycle, best done without thinking about it – or rather: the best cyclists surely *do* think about what they are doing.

This book is an essay. It makes no claim to comprehensiveness. It does not attempt to compile a list of philosophical methods, or of theories about philosophical methods. It touches on historical matters only glancingly. Instead, it explores some interrelated issues that strike me as interesting and not well understood. It starts by inquiring into the nature of philosophical questions. It proceeds in part by detailed case studies of particular examples. Since all examples have their own special characteristics, generalizations from them must be tentative. But many long-standing misconceptions in philosophy are helped to survive by an unwillingness to look carefully and undogmatically at examples, sometimes protected by a self-righteous image of oneself and one's friends as the only people who do look carefully and undogmatically at examples (some disciples of the later Wittgenstein come to mind).

It is difficult to displace one philosophical picture except by another. Although discussion of philosophical methodology is itself part of philosophy, it is less often conducted with a clear view of the theoretical alternatives than is usual in philosophy. David Lewis once wrote that “what we accomplish in philosophical argument” is to “measure the price” of maintaining a philosophical claim; when his remark is cited as an obvious truth, it tends not to be noticed that it too is subject to philosophical argument, and has its price – not least

the danger of infinite regress, since claims about the price of maintaining a philosophical claim are themselves subject to philosophical argument.<sup>2</sup> Another hope for this book is that it will clarify an alternative to widespread assumptions about the nature of philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> See his 1983a: x. Lewis himself gives a brief philosophical argument for his claim about measuring the price, based on the premise that “[o]ur ‘intuitions’ are simply opinions,” against a foundationalist alternative. He also qualifies the claim, allowing that Gödel and Gettier may have conclusively refuted philosophical theories, and that perhaps the price of a philosophical claim “is something we can settle more or less conclusively.”

## 1

# The Linguistic Turn and the Conceptual Turn

---

*The Linguistic Turn* is the title of an influential anthology edited by Richard Rorty, published in 1967. He credited the phrase to Gustav Bergmann (Bergmann 1964: 3; Rorty 1967: 9). In his introduction, Rorty (1967: 3) explained:

The purpose of the present volume is to provide materials for reflection on the most recent philosophical revolution, that of linguistic philosophy. I shall mean by “linguistic philosophy” the view that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use.

“The linguistic turn” has subsequently become the standard vague phrase for a diffuse event – some regard it as *the* event – in twentieth-century philosophy, one not confined to signed-up linguistic philosophers in Rorty’s sense. For those who took the turn, language was somehow the central theme of philosophy.

The word “theme” is used with deliberate vagueness. It does not mean “subject matter,” for the linguistic turn was not the attempted reduction of philosophy to linguistics. The theme of a piece of music is not its subject matter. Those who viewed philosophy as an activity of dispelling confusions of linguistic origin did not see it as having a subject matter in the sense in which a science has a subject matter. But merely to regard linguistic analysis as one philosophical method among many is not yet to have taken the linguistic turn, for it is not yet to regard language as central. We will be more precise below.

There is an increasingly widespread sense that the linguistic turn is past. We will ask how far the turn has been, or should be, reversed.

Language has been regarded as central to philosophy in many different ways, which cannot all be treated together. A history of the many different forms that the linguistic turn took would be a history of much of twentieth-century philosophy. That is a task for another book, by another author. Self-indulgently, I will 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.

A. J. Ayer was the first holder of the Chair to take the linguistic turn.<sup>1</sup> In 1936, back from Vienna and its Circle but not yet in the Chair, he announced an uncompromisingly formal version of linguistic philosophy:

[T]he philosopher, as an analyst, is not directly concerned with the physical properties of things. He is concerned only with the way in which we speak about them. In other words, the propositions of philosophy are not factual, but linguistic in character – that is, they do not describe the behaviour of physical, or even mental, objects; they express definitions, or the formal consequences of definitions. (Ayer 1936: 61–2)

Ayer traced his views back ultimately to the empiricism of Berkeley and Hume (Ayer 1936: 11). His contrast between definitions of words and descriptions of objects is, roughly, the linguistic analogue of Hume’s contrast between relations of ideas and matters of fact. For an empiricist, the *a priori* methods of philosophy cannot provide us with knowledge of synthetic truths about matters of fact (“the behaviour of physical, or even mental, objects”); they yield only analytic truths concerning relations of ideas (“definitions, or the formal consequences of definitions”). A rather traditional empiricism later overshadowed the linguistic theme in Ayer’s work.

Ayer was the predecessor of Sir Michael Dummett in the Wykeham Chair. Dummett gave a much-cited articulation of the linguistic turn, attributing it to Frege:

Only with Frege was the proper object of philosophy finally established: namely, first, that the goal of philosophy is the analysis of the

<sup>1</sup> Ayer’s three immediate predecessors were John Cook Wilson, H. H. Joachim and H. H. Price.

structure of *thought*; secondly, that the study of *thought* is to be sharply distinguished from the study of the psychological process of *thinking*; and, finally, that the only proper method for analysing thought consists in the analysis of *language*. . . . [T]he acceptance of these three tenets is common to the entire analytical school. (Dummett 1978: 458)

On this view, thought is essentially expressible (whether or not actually expressed) in a public language, which filters out the subjective noise, the merely psychological aspects of thinking, from the inter-subjective message, that which one thinks. Dummett's own corpus constitutes one of the most imposing monuments of analytic philosophy as so defined. Unlike Ayer, he does not describe philosophical claims as definitions. Unlike Rorty, he characterizes the linguistic turn as involving distinctive claims about the subject matter of philosophy, not only about its method. On Dummett's view, Frege's insight replaced epistemology by philosophy of language as first philosophy. But this methodological innovation is supposed to be grounded in the account of the proper object of philosophy.

Elsewhere, Dummett makes clear that he takes this concern with language to be what distinguishes "analytical philosophy" from other schools (1993: 4). His account of its inception varies slightly. At one points (1993: 5), he says: "[A]nalytical philosophy was born when the 'linguistic turn' was taken. This was not, of course, taken uniformly by any group of philosophers at any one time: but the first clear example known to me occurs in Frege's *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik* of 1884." Later (1993: 27), we read: "If we identify the linguistic turn as the starting-point of analytical philosophy proper, there can be no doubt that, to however great an extent Frege, Moore and Russell prepared the ground, the crucial step was taken by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* of 1922." Presumably, in Frege the linguistic turn was a fitful insight, in Wittgenstein, a systematic conception.

That "analytical philosophers" in Dummett's sense coincide with those usually classified as such is not obvious. Some kind of linguistic turn occurred in much of what is usually called "continental [supposedly non-analytic] philosophy." That Jacques Derrida did not subscribe in his own way to Dummett's three tenets is unclear: if some stretching of terms is required, it is for the later Wittgenstein

too. Conversely, Bertrand Russell did not subscribe to the three tenets, although often cited as a paradigm "analytical philosopher." Over the past 20 years, fewer and fewer of those who would accept the label "analytic philosophy" for their work would also claim to take the linguistic turn (I am not one of those few). Even philosophers strongly influenced by Dummett, such as Gareth Evans, Christopher Peacocke, and John Campbell, no longer give language the central role he describes. For Dummett, they belong to a tradition that has grown out of "analytical philosophy" without themselves being "analytical philosophers" (1993: 4–5). In effect, they aimed to analyze thought directly, without taking a diversion through the analysis of language. In the 1980s it became commonplace in some circles to suggest that the philosophy of mind had displaced the philosophy of language in the driving seat of philosophy.

For philosophers of mind who accepted Jerry Fodor's (1975) influential hypothesis of a language of thought, the priority of thought to public language did not imply the priority of thought to all language, since thought itself was in a language, the brain's computational code. In principle, someone might combine that view with Dummett's three tenets of analytic philosophy, contrary to Dummett's intention; he did not mean a private language. Moreover, the first-personal inaccessibility of the language of thought makes such a version of the linguistic turn methodologically very different from the traditional ones.

For those who deny the methodological priority of language to thought, the minimal fallback from Dummett's three tenets is to reject the third but maintain the first two. They assert that the goal of philosophy is the analysis of the structure of thought, and that the study of thought is to be sharply distinguished from the study of the psychological process of thinking, but deny that the only proper method for analysing thought consists in the analysis of language. If thought has constituents, we may call them "concepts." On this view, concepts take the place of words in Dummett's analytical philosophy.

In practice, linguistic philosophers were often happy enough to speak of concepts rather than words, for they regarded a concept as what synonymous expressions had in common; their primary interest was in the features common to synonyms, not in the differences between them. It is therefore not too misleading to describe as *conceptual philosophers* those who accept Dummett's first two tenets –

that the goal of philosophy is the analysis of the structure of thought, and that the study of thought is to be sharply distinguished from the study of the psychological process of thinking – whether or not they accept the third. We may also describe them as doing *conceptual philosophy*, and as having taken the *conceptual turn*.

The conceptual turn constitutes a much broader movement than the linguistic turn. It is neutral over the relative priority of language and thought. We think and talk about things – truly or falsely depending on whether they are or are not as we think or say they are. The aboutness of thought and talk is their *intentionality*; the conceptual turn puts intentionality at the centre of philosophy. This terminology indicates how little the conceptual turn is confined to what would ordinarily be called “analytic philosophy.” The phenomenological tradition may constitute another form of the conceptual turn. In the hermeneutic study of interpretation and various shades of postmodernist discourse about discourse the conceptual turn takes a more specifically linguistic form.

Have we stretched our terms so far that all philosophy is conceptual philosophy? No. On a natural view, concepts constitute only a small fraction of a largely mind-independent reality. That the goal of philosophy is in some sense to analyze that small fraction is no platitude. To put it very schematically, let *absolute idealism about the subject matter of philosophy* be the view that philosophy studies only concepts, in contrast to *ontological absolute idealism*, the wilder view that only concepts exist.<sup>2</sup> Although absolute idealism about the subject matter of philosophy does not entail ontological absolute idealism, why should we accept absolute idealism about the subject matter of philosophy if we reject ontological absolute idealism? Of course, we might reject absolute idealism about the subject matter of philosophy while nevertheless holding that the correct method for philosophy is to study its not purely conceptual subject matter by studying concepts of that subject matter. This methodological claim will be considered later; for present purposes, we merely note how much weaker it is than those formulated by Ayer and Dummett.

The claim that concepts constitute only a small fraction of reality might be opposed on various grounds. Recall that concepts were

<sup>2</sup> The “absolute” is to distinguish these forms of idealism from the corresponding “subjective” forms, in which concepts are replaced by psychological processes.

defined as the constituents of thought. If thought consists of Russellian propositions, complexes of the objects, properties, relations, and other elements of reality the proposition is about, then those objects, properties, relations, and other elements of reality are by definition concepts. In that case, ontological absolute idealism may be a triviality, because whatever exists is a constituent of various Russellian propositions, and thereby counts as a concept. However, even conceptual philosophers who accept the Russellian view of propositions will distinguish *conceptual structure*, the structure characteristic of propositions, from other sorts of structure. For example, they will analyze the atomic proposition that this crystal is translucent as the object-property complex (this crystal, translucency), but they will not regard it as any of their business to analyze the structure of the crystal itself: that is chemical structure, not conceptual structure in the relevant sense, otherwise the proposition would not be atomic. Their goal for philosophy – to analyze the structure of thought – is still only to analyze one sort of structure among many. Thus one might accept the Russellian view of propositions and still oppose the conceptual turn, on the grounds that philosophy can appropriately investigate general features of nonconceptual structure too, such as the general mereological structure of physical objects.

Alternatively, take a more standard view of concepts, as something like modes of presentation, ways of thinking or speaking, or intellectual capacities. Still, the claim that concepts constitute only a small fraction of reality might be accused of violating Dummett’s second tenet by confusing thought with the process of thinking. Almost everyone agrees that psychological events constitute only a small fraction of reality, but that is not yet to concede that thought in a non-psychologistic sense is similarly confined. John McDowell (1994: 27), for instance, argues:<sup>3</sup>

[T]here is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the

<sup>3</sup> Although McDowell is sometimes classified as a “post-analytic” philosopher, he finds his own way to accept Dummett’s “fundamental tenet of analytical philosophy,” that “philosophical questions about thought are to be approached through language” (1994: 125).

case. So since the world is everything that is the case . . . there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world. Of course thought can be distanced from the world by being false, but there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought.

For McDowell, the sort of thing one can think is a conceptual content: the conceptual has no outer boundary beyond which lies unconceptualized reality. He denies the accusation of idealism on the grounds that he is not committed to any contentious thesis of mind-dependence.

The sort of thing that can be the case is that a certain object has a certain property. McDowell's claim is not that the object and the property *are* concepts, but merely that we can in principle form concepts of them, with which to think that the object has the property. Indeed, we can in principle form many different concepts of them: we can think of the same object as Hesperus or as Phosphorus. In Fregean terms congenial to McDowell, different senses determine the same reference. He admits "an alignment of minds with the realm of sense, not with the realm of reference . . . thought and reality meet in the realm of sense" (1994: 179–80). For objects, his claim that the conceptual is unbounded amounts to the claim that any object can be thought of. Likewise for the sort of thing that can be the case: the claim is, for example, that whenever an object has a property, it can be thought, of the object and the property, that the former has the latter. But, on a coherent and natural reading of "the sort of thing that can be the case," such things are individuated coarsely, by the objects, properties, and relations that they involve. Thus, since Hesperus *is* Phosphorus, what is the case if Hesperus is bright *is* what is the case if Phosphorus is bright: the objects are the same, as are the properties. On this reading, McDowell's claim "When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case" is false, because what one thinks is individuated at the level of sense while what is the case is individuated at the level of reference. Although McDowell's claim is true on weaker readings, they will not bear the weight his argument puts on them.

McDowell's argument in any case seems to require the premise that everything (object, property, relation, state of affairs, . . .) is thinkable. That premise is highly contentious. What reason have we to assume that reality does not contain *elusive objects*, incapable in

principle of being individually thought of? Although we can think of them collectively – for example, as elusive objects – that is not to single out any one of them in thought. Can we be sure that ordinary material objects do not consist of clouds of elusive sub-sub-atomic particles? We might know them by their collective effects while unable to think of any single one of them. The general question whether there can be elusive objects looks like a good candidate for philosophical consideration. Of course, McDowell does not intend the conceptual to be limited by the merely medical limitations of human beings, but the elusiveness may run deeper than that: the nature of the objects may preclude the kind of separable causal interaction with complex beings that isolating them in thought would require. In Fregean terminology again, a sense is a mode of presentation of a referent; a mode of presentation of something is a way of presenting it to a possible thinker, if not an actual one; for all McDowell has shown, there may be necessary limitations on thinking.<sup>4</sup> Although elusive objects belong to the same very general ontological category of objects as those we can single out, their possibility still undermines McDowell's claim that we cannot make "interesting sense" of the idea of something outside the conceptual realm (1994: 105–6). We do not know whether there actually are elusive objects. What would motivate the claim that there are none, if not some form of idealism very far from McDowell's intentions? We should adopt no conception of philosophy that on methodological grounds excludes elusive objects.<sup>5</sup>

Suppose, just for the sake of argument, that there are no elusive objects. That by itself would still not vindicate a restriction of philosophy to the conceptual, the realm of sense or thought. The practitioners of any discipline have thoughts and communicate them,

<sup>4</sup> McDowell's invocation of humility (1994: 40) addresses contingent limitations, not necessary ones.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Johnston (1993: 96–7) discusses "the Enigmas, entities essentially undetectable by us." He stipulates that they are collectively as well as individually undetectable; thus our elusive objects need not be his Enigmas. If we cannot have good evidence that there are no Enigmas, it may well be a waste of time to worry whether there are Enigmas. But it would not follow that it is a waste of time to worry whether there *can be* Enigmas. Their definition does not rule out knowledge of the possibility of such things; such knowledge may itself be philosophically useful (indeed, Johnston uses it for his philosophical purposes).



but they are rarely studying those very thoughts: rather, they are studying what their thoughts are about. Most thoughts are not about thoughts. To make philosophy the study of thought is to insist that philosophers' thoughts should be about thoughts. It is not obvious why philosophers should accept that restriction.

Even within what is usually considered analytic philosophy of mind, much work violates the two tenets of conceptual philosophy. Naturalists hold that everything is part of the natural world, and should be studied as such; many of them study thought as part of the natural world by not sharply distinguishing it from the psychological process of thinking. Those who study sensations or qualia without treating them as intentional phenomena are not usually attempting to analyze the structure of thought; their interest is primarily in the nature of the sensations or qualia themselves, not in our concepts of them. Even when the question of veridicality arises, it is not always conceded that there are structured thoughts: some philosophers claim that perception has a conceptually unstructured content that represents the environment as being a certain way. Their interest is in the nature of the nonconceptual content itself, not just in our concept of it.

Despite early hopes or fears, philosophy of mind has not come to play the organizing role in philosophy that philosophy of language once did. No single branch of philosophy does: philosophy is no more immune than other disciplines to increasing specialization. Nor is any one philosophical method currently treated as a panacea for philosophical ills, with consequent privileges for its home branch. Once we consider other branches of philosophy, we notice much more philosophizing whose primary subject matter is not conceptual.

Biology and physics are not studies of thought. In their most theoretical reaches, they merge into the philosophy of biology and the philosophy of physics. Why then should philosophers of biology and philosophers of physics study only thought? Although they sometimes study what biologists' and physicists' concepts are or should be, sometimes they study what those concepts are concepts of, in an abstract and general manner. If the conceptual turn is incompatible with regarding such activities as legitimately philosophical, why take the conceptual turn?

There is a more central example. 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 – perhaps we have no thought about them until it is initiated by metaphysicians. Contemporary metaphysics studies substances and essences, universals and particulars, space and time, possibility and necessity. Although nominalist or conceptualist reductions of all these matters have been attempted, such theories have no methodological priority and generally turn out to do scant justice to what they attempt to reduce.

The usual stories about the history of twentieth-century philosophy fail to fit much of the liveliest, exactest, and most creative achievements of the final third of that century: the revival of metaphysical theorizing, realist in spirit, often speculative, sometimes commonsensical, associated with Saul Kripke, David Lewis, Kit Fine, Peter van Inwagen, David Armstrong and many others: work that has, to cite just one example, made it anachronistic to dismiss essentialism as anachronistic.<sup>6</sup> On the traditional grand narrative schemes in the history of philosophy, this activity must be a throwback to pre-Kantian metaphysics: it ought not to be happening – but it is. Many of those who practice it happily acknowledge its continuity with traditional metaphysics; appeals to the authority of Kant, or Wittgenstein, or history, ring hollow, for they are unbacked by any argument that has withstood the test of recent time.

One might try to see in contemporary metaphysics a Quinean breakdown of divisions between philosophy and the natural sciences. But if it is metaphysics naturalized, then so is the metaphysics of Aristotle, Descartes, and Leibniz. Armchair argument retains a central role, as do the modal notions of metaphysical possibility and necessity. Although empirical knowledge constrains the attribution of essential properties, results are more often reached through a subtle interplay of logic and the imagination. The crucial experiments are thought experiments.

Might the contrast between the new-old metaphysics and the conceptual turn be less stark than it appears to be? Contemporary metaphysicians firmly resist attempts to reconstrue their enterprise as

<sup>6</sup> On essentialism see, for example, Kripke (1980), French, Uehling, and Wettstein (1986), Fine (1994, 1995) and Wiggins (2001). For a good statement of the outlook of contemporary metaphysics see Zimmerman (2004).