

Book Review
Doing Philosophy: From Common Curiosity to
Logical Reasoning
Timothy Williamson
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Analytic philosophers define their philosophical approach as a method and not as a shared doctrine amongst adepts. But what is the method? This is not an easy question and Timothy Williamson – one of the more brilliant and sharper of analytic philosophers of our times – offers his answer in this book.

Let me say from the beginning that this is the answer of an analytic philosopher who does believe that the analytic method is the only one philosophy may have. This may be disappointing for philosophers with a more ecumenic approach, who allow for many methods to be equally valuable, and who would have appreciated a proposal for a restricted philosophical methodology. But this is not something that can be expected from a philosopher such as Williamson, who has been working as a leading philosopher in the analytic tradition all his life and whose intent is to point out the weakness and the strength of the analytic tools adopted so far and give advice on how to go forward. The observation that the analytic tradition is the only one considered in the book is just briefly mentioned in the bibliographical notes at the end of the book and not considered in need of more attention or explanation.

But the analytic approach of the book should not be interpreted as a British-American western-only approach to philosophy: eastern philosophers, as Dharmottara and Avicenna, are also considered. The author's interest is always in the methods of the philosophers considered. For the reader who is ready to accept the analytic-oriented approach of the book and who is interested in pondering the strengths and weaknesses of the analytical methods, this is a useful book, written with the intent to be understood by the

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layman, too, without footnotes, but also with the argumentative accuracy Williamson is famous for, and interesting both for students and professionals.

It is well known that philosophical questions are already raised by children and considered by all people during their lifetime. How can we answer these questions? The book proposes that philosophy should be carried out with method, but – and this is the main tenet – the instruments philosophers adopt are not so different from the ones adopted in other sciences, making philosophy no exception in scientific human research. Each chapter of the book is devoted to considering and discussing a specific attitude or tool analytic philosophers (and, in many cases, other scientists) adopt, and to evaluating their efficacy and their relevance; these tools are: the use of common sense, discussion, clarifications of terms, thought experiments, comparison of theories, deduction, the role of history of philosophy, the interaction with other disciplines and model-building.

As an analytic philosopher myself, I agree on most of the book's claims, but I also diverge in some important respects. As it is not my intention to give a neutral report of the book, it may be interesting if I discuss the main contention. As I have already mentioned, Williamson claims that philosophy's methods are not so different from those of other sciences; he writes:

Philosophy, like all science, starts with ways of knowing and thinking all normal humans have, and applies them a bit more carefully, a bit more systematically, a bit more critically, iterating that process over and over again.
(p. 5)

The question which then arises is the following: what is the specific role of philosophy then? Is there any specific role for philosophy which is different from that of other sciences? It is quite evident that a philosopher does not deny a specific role for philosophy and Williamson is no different. He claims that the specificity of philosophy has to do with the general nature of the problems considered:

Traditionally, philosophers have wanted to understand the nature of *everything*, in a very general way: existence and non-existence; possibility and necessity, the world of common sense, the world of natural science, the world of mathematics; parts and wholes, space and time, cause and effect, mind and matter. They want to understand our understanding itself[...] They

want to understand and judge what we do with understanding [...] Philosophy is hyper-ambitious. (p. 3)

The claim of the generality of philosophy is not completely convincing to me. In a very naïve and tedious reading, this seems to imply that while scientists work on very specific matters (as the functioning of a specific type of cell stimulated by a certain chemical substance), philosophers are considering very general questions such as: what exists? What is time? Etc. It is well known, however, that philosophers (and analytic philosophers in particular) tend to publish work at least as specific as most scientists. But even if we try to read the claim in a more reasonable way as the claim that science always has to restrict the research area, while philosophy tends to have an area of research that is more widespread and generalized, this does not seem to be correct either. Scientific theories such as quantum mechanics and general relativity do not seem to have a restricted domain of application that philosophy can widen.

I do not deny that there is a specificity in philosophical research, but, as I see it, while science is more interested in what is contingently the case in our world, philosophy is more interested in other topics as well, as for example the foundations of any theoretical enterprise or the metaphysical alternatives to our world. In my opinion, the main difference between science and philosophy is not to be found in the difference between the restricted area of science and the broad area of philosophy, but in a difference in interests and in the methods instead.

What is the difference? Philosophers are ready to discuss their methods and their assumptions, whilst scientists may sometimes do so but any change in their method and assumptions is considered more a revolution than the norm. Let us try to introduce a thought experiment in order to test my hypothesis; when we read what Williamson's book has to say on the methods of philosophy, we read: "Many philosophers will hate my picture of how to do philosophy. I leave the reader to judge." (p. 5) and when we are confronted with this assertion, it seems to be a reasonably self-critical thing to write, because we are acquainted with the fact that philosophers discuss and disagree about their methods of doing philosophy, as they discuss any methodological or theoretical assumption that can be made. Now imagine reading a book on the methodology of biology by an expert biologist and finding at the very beginning of the book "Many biologists will hate my picture of how to do biology. I leave the reader to judge." The reader may be more puzzled by this

assertion, supposing that the writer is proposing a very unconventional way of doing biology.

Williamson has a way to react to my observation by claiming that philosophy “is not yet a fully mature science” (p. 5), and this is the reason why philosophers are still discussing their method, while biologists do not. This may be a good explanation for the reaction to the imagined biology book, but we may wonder whether we really want a mature philosophy, as Williamson is proposing it.

Let us consider for example the use of common sense: Williamson argues that we adopt a certain number of assumptions that are our undisputed starting point and when we do philosophy we may revise them, but we may not be able to revise all of them; for example we may have difficulty in accepting a philosophical theory that denies the existence of human beings. I agree with this observation as I am particularly keen to maintain as much common sense as possible. But we all know that some philosophers – nihilists for example – deny that there are human beings; when I first came across this philosophical proposal, I thought it completely untenable, then some doubts crept in. Nihilism does not convince me, I am not a nihilist, but it was important for me to come across this philosophical theory in order to explain - at least to myself - which assumptions a nihilist accepts and that I do not make. I would not abolish nihilism from philosophy, as I would not abolish skepticism; they are powerful instruments because of the resistance they produce in me: I would not abolish them for a mature philosophy, even if I do not embrace them.

Williamson may react by saying that he is not proposing to abolish them, but to compare theories and their claims, as scientists do. I think that the comparison between scientific theories in order to evaluate them is quite different from the comparison between philosophical theories. It may be an idealization, but it seems to me that scientists share more targets than philosophers do. In most cases, science is confronted with the efficacy of the previsions, while philosophy is not so much evaluated by the efficacy of previsions, it is instead evaluated by the internal coherence and by the adequacy of its assumptions. For example, it seems to me that scientists never call into question the existence of human beings and we would consider them dangerous if they did. Some philosophers instead are ready to doubt their existence and we may not agree with them but we may still appreciate their arguments. Are we sure that when we do so, we are being immature? Can we avoid their theories because of their being against common sense?

Williamson would probably react by saying that excessive doubt is dangerous for philosophy. We may not doubt everything, this is correct. But we may not be certain of everything we accept either. A methodologically sober attitude (i.e. avoiding doubting everything) may go along with a critical attitude (i.e. we may not be certain of what we believe). And the critical attitude is part of the philosophical method. This is not to say that scientists cannot adopt a critical method as well, but their principal criterion of evaluation is the reliability of their previsions and they rarely call into question any assumption when the previsions made by a scientific theory are reliable, whilst philosophers' assumptions are instead evaluated in a broader way: in some cases, contrary evidence is considered to be an illusion, which should be measured against the elegance and the coherence of the theory. As far as I know, no scientific theory has ever claimed to be evaluated in terms of its elegance and coherence, independently of any evidence; philosophers have sometimes done this. It seems to me in general that philosophy has its own targets and its own instruments of evaluation, which are not completely comparable to that of science.

There is something that is not explicitly mentioned by Williamson but which I personally see in the background of it: a worry for many philosophers. While science makes progress, it is more difficult to say what the progress of philosophy is; and the doubt that philosophers do not make progress insinuates itself. We know that many philosophical theories have been relevant for scientific discoveries, that logic and philosophical logic have obtained many important goals, but we may doubt that philosophy is growing in the same way as science is. We may suppose that if philosophy becomes more similar to science, it will make progress as well. If this is an implicit assumption in the book, I do not agree with it. In my opinion, philosophy has its own target and its own method. Science grows by making discoveries, philosophy grows through alternative proposals. Science aims at discovering truth, philosophers make more room for possibilities. This does not mean that philosophy renounces truth, even possibilities may be true or false. The actual truth of science is contingent, the truth of possibility is not.

This last observation brings us back to Williamson's claim that the specific nature of philosophy has to do with the generality of the research area. I believe that while science is directed to contingency, philosophy opens up to metaphysical dimensions. And what I have tried to claim in this short comment is that this difference of target justifies the difference in methods: the instruments of evaluation are different, and the procedures differ as well.

Let me conclude this comment by saying that, even if you agree with my point of view, I strongly recommend reading Williamson's book: it is a very good book, very clearly written, very engaging. It is one of the best opportunities for an analytic philosopher to think about her working instruments and her methods.