

## Description of method

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*Abstract.* Timothy Williamson objects that we do not have any reason to regard reflective equilibrium as a philosophical method, whether good or bad. In this paper, I propose a less demanding account of when a method is being described.

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In the method of reflective equilibrium, a person has general principles and moral judgments about specific situations and by making appropriate adjustments they try to achieve a coherence between the two, in which principles entail judgments. That is a brief description anyway. But the distinguished philosopher Timothy Williamson – in a chapter with Bernard-Williams-like sentence rhythms?<sup>1</sup> – writes:

But a prior question is whether such descriptions of the process yield an adequate conception of a philosophical method, good or bad... A process generally acknowledged as at least superficially analogous to the attainment of reflective equilibrium in philosophy is the mutual adjustment of theory and observation in natural science. Imagine a description of it in which the word “observation” is used simply as a label for judgments with non-general content, irrespective of origin; it ignores the perceptual process. Such a description misses the point of the natural scientific enterprise. It provides no basis for an epistemological assessment. The nature of scientists’ evidence has been left unspecified. Similarly, one has no basis for an epistemological

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<sup>1</sup> I saw one of these men who look like Bernard Williams this morning. For a defender of the humanities, he probably “lives on” in the sciences.

assessment of the method of reflective equilibrium without more information about the epistemological status of the “intuitions.” In particular, it matters what kind of evidence “intuitions” provide. (2022: 246)

Williamson appears to be proposing the following as necessary conditions for a description to count as a description of a method of inquiry or justification, whether good or bad.

- it should identify a source of evidence (e.g. the stream of sensory experience or the faculty of sensory experience);
- it should answer the question of what kind of evidence this source provides (e.g. information about the external world, information that is not necessarily true);
- it should answer the question of how this source can provide such evidence (e.g. through causal relations – an instance of a type of thing in the external world causes an experience of there being an instance, in appropriate conditions).

The answers in the parentheses are my guesses at what might satisfy Williamson, so he will think, “Yes, this is a description of a method.”

These conditions seem overly demanding to me – perhaps a slightly easier person to satisfy! Well, character is not the issue here. They seem overly demanding given that the aim of the proposed conditions is to include both descriptions of good and bad methods, and merely exclude other things, such as a description of a horse. I would propose the following:

*(Description of method definition)* Something is a description of a method of inquiry if and only if:

- (i) The description presents instructions.
- (ii) Following the instructions leads a person to arrive at conclusions.

For example, “How many times can you spin around before you fall over? If the number is even, then infer a storm tomorrow. If odd, then infer no storm.” Is this not a description of a

method, a method for arriving at conclusions about the weather tomorrow? It is – or it is when supplemented by spin counting instructions – though presumably the method is not a good one. The description does not have to answer Williamson’s questions to count, whether by true or false answers. We can adapt the definition offered to explain what a method of justification is: following the instructions leads a person to arrive at conclusions regarding what is justified or what not.

Perhaps Williamson will say that he is interested in philosophical methods and to count as a description of one of these, then his questions have to be answered. But in the quotation Williamson himself starts talking about the method of natural science, as if he is more interested in a general account of when a description counts as a description of a method, regardless of discipline; and earlier his working hypothesis is that there is no radical difference in the role of evidence in philosophy and other disciplines (2022: 210).

## **Reference**

Williamson, T. 2022 (second edition). *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons.