Thoughts

Philosophy and Common Sense 3: Philosophy as a Science

Timothy Williamson and Sebastian Sunday-Grève discuss the question of where philosophy starts, and the idea of philosophy as a non-natural science

What Is Philosophy?

Sebastian Sunday-Grève

The story Timothy Williamson tells of how natural it is to engage in doing philosophy, because all it takes is curiosity and common sense, does more than show that philosophy is as natural as any other activity. As we have seen in the previous two exchanges in this series, the story also shows that science and philosophy are products of the same natural pursuit of knowledge, and the story lends itself to an intriguing argument regarding the professionalisation of the discipline. Finally, for Williamson the story also serves to prepare the ground for his larger vision of philosophy as a non-natural science. However, he also says that, when it comes to philosophy or the word "philosophy", "abstract definitions […] are not very useful." So I want to press him a little to see just how useful or useless he finds definitions of philosophy or "philosophy", and why.

What we are really interested in as philosophers, if we are interested in anything like a definition in this connection, will of course be definitions not of the word "philosophy" but of the thing that the word is supposed to represent. Nevertheless, a linguistic definition can sometimes be useful to someone who wants to know what this thing called "philosophy" really is. For example, suppose that someone asks you what philosophy is, and you begin by telling them that the English word "philosophy" derives – like its European cousins "filosofía", "philosophie", etc. – from ancient Greek and has often been translated as "love of wisdom". This might well be useful to them, even though by itself it is unlikely to be *very* useful.

Now let us consider definitions of the thing, philosophy. Williamson says: "I understand philosophy as a science, but not a *natural* science." This actually is an abstract definition, albeit not a precise one because it will certainly apply to mathematics as well, which is the paradigm of a non-natural science. It leaves much still to be explained, of course, but the relation between philosophy and science is a sufficiently important and controversial issue that defining philosophy as a non-natural science clearly constitutes a

substantive claim and, to this extent, is a useful thing to do if one is in the business of explaining what philosophy is along such lines.

It seems likely that, when criticising "abstract definitions", Williamson had in mind the kind of definition that seeks to provide necessary and sufficient conditions. But that is not the only kind of definition there is. And even if it were, might not such a definition still be of significant use, especially perhaps if one used it as a model – following the model-building strategy that Williamson recommends elsewhere – so that such a definition may be useful even if it is in some ways false?

> *How useful or useless [are] definitions of philosophy or "philosophy"?*

More generally, it is rather surprising that Williamson has not presented the same sort of succinct account in his work on what philosophy is as he characteristically has done in other work, such as his defences of epistemicism about vagueness (the view that vagueness is a form of ignorance) and necessitism about ontology (the view that it is necessary what there is) or his view that knowledge is the most general factive mental state. It is not clear what the reason for this might be, but it seems clear enough that he is actually defending a view that could be accurately described as a form of scientism about philosophy. If he started describing it in this way, this might spark a fruitful de-

bate. Of course, this label would come with some unwanted baggage, but that does not make it less applicable, and Williamson has not shied away from reviving other types of view that many would previously have thought indefensible.

What Philosophy Is
Timothy Williamson

In "What Is Philosophy?", Sebastian Sunday-Grève presses me to say more about what I take philosophy to be.

The word "philosophy", like the word "mathematics", has no generally accepted definition. There is its ancient Greek etymology, usually translated as "love of wisdom", though the Greeks applied the word much more widely than we do – for example, to physics. Anyway, what has love to do with it? If a biographer somehow established that Ludwig Wittgenstein did *not* love wisdom, that would not disqualify him from being a philosopher. He was one because he *did* philosophy, in his writing and conversation, no matter how he felt about wisdom. As for wisdom itself, people can have it without being at all philosophical. They may just have an instinct for practical decision-making when the need arises, so that things usually turn out for the best.

A more productive approach is to ask how we actually apply the word "philosophy", unguided by any dictionary definition. For a start, there are some classic examples, over which there is no serious dispute. It would be just silly to deny that Plato's *Republic*, Descartes' *Meditations*, or Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* is a work of philosophy. Whether they are the *best* such works is another question. The point is that the term "philosophy" undoubtedly applies to them,

just as the term "city" undoubtedly applies to London, Paris, and Berlin. We have *prototypes* for "philosophy" just as we have prototypes for "city".

We also apply the term "philosophy" to other works suitably related to the prototypes. Suitable relations include both *similarity* and *interaction*. Works can be related by similarity in topic, style of argument, and so on. They can also be related because the later work is influenced by or reacts against the earlier one. For instance, the correspondence of Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia with Descartes has both kinds of relation, which makes it easy to recognise philosophy in her letters. The Islamic philosophical tradition is related in both ways to ancient Greek philosophy. But we can recognise ancient Indian and Chinese philosophy as philosophy without assuming any interaction with the Western philosophical tradition, because there is still enough similarity. In other cases, there is less similarity but more interaction: for instance, Georg Lichtenberg's fragmented aphorisms are very unlike a traditional philosophical treatise, but some of them respond aptly to Descartes' "I think, therefore I am". By iterating this process of widening our understanding of what to count as philosophy, we get far beyond the narrow stereotype of it as a male European activity, just as someone who starts with London, Paris, and Berlin as their prototypes of a city can then recognise Beijing as just as much a city as they are.

Of course, if we apply the term "philosophy" too widely, it loses most of its meaning. For example, the football manager Brendan Rodgers defined his "football philosophy" thus: "we like to play attacking creative football but always with a tactical discipline." For a slightly more restrictive sense of the word, one can consider what is taught and researched in university departments which self-identify as a "Department of Philosophy" (or its translation into another language). I see no prospect of capturing all of that variety in a single, neat form of words. Mathematicians get by with the ability to recognise mathematics when they see it; perhaps we philosophers can get by with the ability to recognise philosophy when we see it – though with a higher proportion of contested cases.

A more productive approach is to ask how we actually apply the word "philosophy"

Very reasonably, Sebastian points out that, despite my unwillingness to define "philosophy", I do assert something specific about philosophy as a whole: that it is a non-natural science. In calling it a "science", I mean that it is a kind of systematic, critical, evidence-based inquiry. In English, the term is often restricted to the *natural* sciences, such as physics, chemistry, and biology, in which experiment, observation, and measurement are key methods. As I use the term "science", it carries no such restriction. Mathematics is obviously a science, but it is not a natural science. Like mathematics, philosophy is a non-natural science; experiment, observation, and measurement are not key methods. Likewise, history (based on written documents) is not a natural sci-

ence, but it is a science, because it is a kind of systematic, critical, evidence-based inquiry; thus history is a non-natural science too.

Sebastian characterises my view as "scientism about philosophy". Looking up definitions of "scientism", I soon came to "excessive belief in the power of scientific knowledge and techniques", which captures a standard use of the word. Since anything excessive is wrong, naturally I deny that my view is scientism in that sense. I do believe in the power of scientific knowledge and techniques, but my belief is, I hope, not excessive.

Still, there is an urgent challenge. Given the great diversity of philosophy, how can philosophy as a whole be a science? Even if some parts of it are scientific in the relevant sense, surely other parts are not. In particular, some philosophers – such as Wittgenstein – passionately deny that philosophy is a science. They hold that aspiring to be a science turns philosophy into a pseudo-science. How can the work of such philosophers count as part of science?

In response, a first point is that whether someone's work is scientific depends on its nature, not as they take it to be, but as it actually is. If there are questions which philosophy can make a systematic, critical, evidence-based attempt to answer, Wittgenstein's belief that those questions are nonsense does not automatically prevent his work from helping to answer them, despite his protests.

What matters is not whether some philosophers *believe* that philosophy cannot be a science, but whether their belief is correct. Often, the idea behind that belief is that philosophical questions only *appear* to be about how things are, but are *really* artefacts

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of confusion: once properly clarified, the question dissolves. Thus nothing is left for a science to inquire into.

That idea has not withstood the test of time. When the required "clarifications" are put on the table, they usually turn out to be just shaky philosophical arguments, based on dogmatic assumptions about meaning which we have no good reason to accept, and which are a poor fit with developments in the philosophy of language over the past sixty years. Often, when philosophers disagree about the answer to a philosophical question, neither side is "confused" in any distinctive sense, although one side or both may of course be *wrong*; it is a normal theoretical disagreement, such as one often encounters in other branches of science. Nor is the disagreement an artefact of ambiguity in some crucial term; each side understands what the other is saying, and rejects it. Treating philosophical disagreements, or apparent disagreements, as some-

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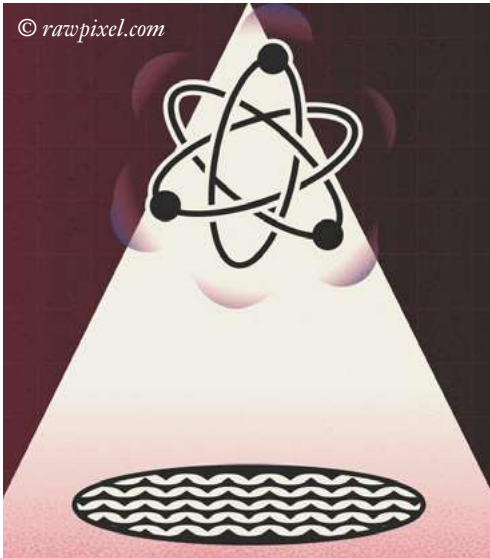
how especially pathological is based, not on any independently recognisable feature distinguishing them from highly theoretical disagreements elsewhere, but on philosophy-hating philosophical prejudices.

A less extreme way of challenging the claim that philosophy is a science is by suggesting that the value of philosophy consists in asking questions, not in answering them. People who say so don't seem to mean that *someone else* will answer the questions. Rather, they seem to mean that asking the questions is valuable *in itself*, irrespective of any prospect of answering them. But what is the point of asking a question if you expect no progress in answering it? Normally, when we think about a question, we try to think of potential answers to it and ways to decide between them. If we have no chance of answering the question, such thinking risks becoming idle. It may lead to thinking about further philosophical questions, but that will be no less idle.

Mightn't we become more open-minded by asking philosophical questions without making any progress in answering them? But what is the value of being open-minded? The metaphor is that of an open door. The point of an open mind is to let something *enter* it: in other words, to get a better answer to the question than one already has. But if what matters is just asking the question, a better answer is beside the point. Those who offer the asking-without-answering model of philosophy have not thought hard enough about what it is to ask a question.

Those who deny that philosophy is a science might do better to give up their attempt to develop an alternative positive account of philosophy, and simply ask the brutal question: if philosophy is a science, how come it has made so little progress?

The best answer to that question is that philosophy has made much more progress than the questioner realises. Perhaps the most obvious area of progress is *logic*, where far more was learnt over the past century than in all previous history. But there has also been significant progress in many other areas of philosophy. The reason why it has not been properly appreciated is that it has not taken the stereotypical form that critics look for, based on their stereotype of progress in natural science. Very little progress in natural science consists in the definitive discovery of new laws of nature. Instead, much scientific progress consists in the development of better *models* of natural phenomena – models which still grossly over-simplify those phenomena as they occur "in the wild", but nevertheless capture some of their key features better than previous models did. This applies most vividly to philosophy as it concerns the human

world, whose messy complexity we cannot hope to map in full detail or without controversy. Most moral and political philosophy concerns *human* action and *human* society; most epistemology concerns *human* knowledge and belief; most of the philosophies of mind, action, language, and art concerns *human* mind, action, language, and art. In those areas, philosophy has made the kind of messy, controversial progress typical of progress in the theoretical study of the human world.

> *In calling philosophy a "science", I mean that it is a kind of systematic, critical, evidence-based inquiry*

The alleged contrast between philosophy as non-progressive and other disciplines as progressive is hard to defend once one realises how much philosophy *overlaps* those other disciplines. For example, the philosophy of language overlaps semantics and pragmatics as branches of linguistics. The philosophy of mind overlaps theoretical psychology and cognitive science. Epistemology overlaps epistemic logic and probability theory, which are also studied in theoretical economics and computer science. The philosophy of physics overlaps highly theoretical physics, and the philosophy of biology overlaps highly theoretical biology. There is no underlying fault-line where non-philosophy tips into philosophy, only continuous gradation in how theoretical the

issues are, how value-laden, and so on.

Once one appreciates how seamlessly philosophy fits into the intellectual landscape of total science, both the attempt to draw a neat line around philosophy and the denial that philosophy is part of science stand out as futile and ill-motivated exercises. Philosophy appears quite naturally as a non-natural science.

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Timothy Williamson is the Wykeham Professor of Logic at the University of Oxford and a visiting professor at Yale. His recent books include Philosophical Method: A Very Short Introduction *(Oxford, 2020) and an enlarged edition of* The Philosophy of Philosophy *(Wiley, 2021). In addition to logic, he works on epistemology, metaphysics and the philosophy of language.*