

**METAPHILOSOPHY:  
AN INQUIRY CONCERNING THE NATURE OF PHILOSOPHY**

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By

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## **Abstract**

What are the proper aims and methods of philosophy? What is philosophy trying to accomplish, and how does it go about accomplishing it? A survey of the history of philosophy and current discussions regarding its aims and methods shows that philosophers radically disagree about the nature of philosophical inquiry. Part of the reason for this observation is that the aims and methods of philosophy are themselves philosophical topics. My task in meta-philosophy is to understand the nature of philosophy given that there is no distinct subject matter, and its aims and methods are subject to philosophical dispute; philosophy is an essentially divided discipline. Philosophers today and throughout history have supposed that philosophy is a scientific discipline; however, if my thesis is correct, philosophy cannot be a science. The first step is to appreciate the diversity of philosophical aims and methods; some aims and methods in philosophy directly contradict each other. Unlike science, which proceeds on the basis of a general universal methodology, philosophy is incapable of making scientific progress due to a radical methodological controversy at the very heart of the discipline. I recommend that, instead of attempting to merge with the aims and methods of science, philosophy should distinguish itself from science, and be understood as a different kind of discipline altogether. Once we reject the scientific meta-philosophical conception of philosophy, we can begin speculating and reconstructing the identity of philosophy from within philosophy itself.

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## **Chapter 1: On the Aims of Philosophy**

### **Section 1: Rejecting a Universal Aim of Philosophy**

The question that brings me to this inquiry is, ‘what is philosophy?’ This question, like many questions in philosophy, is too broad for a straightforward answer. In an attempt to narrow the question for this chapter I ask, ‘what is the aim of philosophy?’ For any discipline, to know the aim of that discipline is to possess the most basic knowledge of that discipline. If we are to have an adequate understanding of the discipline of philosophy, we ought to be able to specify what the aim of philosophy is, some common goal or purpose that could unify the discipline in general. Is there something that all philosophers strive for, something that all philosophers seek? At first glance, one thinks that there is a universal aim of philosophy, but upon deeper reflection, I recognize that any suggestion is more controversial than I had previously thought. A deeper investigation is warranted. We will survey some candidate philosophical aims that might be capable of establishing the unity of the discipline in general—some common goal which could give meaning to the phrase, ‘this is philosophy’. The obvious candidates that come to mind are truth and knowledge, but left in this general and open sense, it’s too broad to mean a whole lot. We might be wondering, what kind of truth? What kind of knowledge?

What we observe among the great historical philosophical works is a recurrent project to determine the foundation of knowledge. If we could establish the proper foundation for inquiry, it might be possible to finally achieve the most general aims of philosophy and answer the biggest questions. What we’ll find is that regardless of what candidate we consider, two fundamental problems concerning the identity of the discipline of philosophy emerge: 1) that the aims of philosophy, when conceived too broadly, fail to distinguish the discipline from other disciplines, and 2) that any narrowly conceived aim suggested to be the general aim of philosophy fails to unify the discipline because the aim of philosophy is philosophically contested. The former I call *the problem of distinction*, the latter I call *the problem of unification*. The general aim of philosophy remains an open question, but for now I recommend, for the future of philosophy, that the noble project to determine the foundation of knowledge and inquiry be given up.

## 1.11: The Distinction between Philosophy and Sophistry

Our task in attempting to answer the question, ‘what is philosophy?’ begins with an examination of the aim of philosophy. Perhaps the most obvious and natural thought that comes to mind is: philosophy aims at truth. We will begin with an investigation as to whether or not ‘truth’ can be established as an aim for philosophy capable of unifying the discipline. Plato makes a well-known distinction between the philosopher and the sophist. If we could define this distinction, we could effectively draw the boundaries of philosophy. However, upon investigation, the philosopher is indistinguishable from the sophist. The concept of truth is philosophically contested and our methods of reasoning about the concept of truth utilize argumentation, rhetoric, and persuasion, which are the aims and methods of the sophist.<sup>1</sup> The aim of truth would fail to unify the discipline of philosophy in general because we cannot distinguish between the philosopher and the sophist. Consequently, in any case that we might think someone is a philosopher, we might also wonder if they are a sophist. The criterion for the distinction—the aim of truth—is not universally agreed upon nor is it adequately distinguishable from the aim of persuasion.

Socrates conceives of the philosopher as a midwife to men, someone who helps give birth to knowledge and wisdom in others. He writes,

Now my art of midwifery is just like theirs in most respects. The difference is that I attend men and not women, and that I watch over the labour of their souls... And the most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind is being delivered of a phantom, that is, an error, or a fertile truth.<sup>2</sup>

The philosopher is one who gives birth to wisdom, knowledge, and truth in others. He provides the test which determines whether others speak of truth or illusion, meaning or nonsense. In contrast, the sophist is a master at argumentation, “his type is precisely the money-making branch of expertise in debating, disputation, controversy, fighting, combat, and acquisition.”<sup>3</sup> When we disagree with the sophist, his method includes the tactic of persuasive argumentation.

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<sup>1</sup> The philosopher qua philosopher is not prepared to forgo validity, which is thought to be an important difference between the philosopher and the sophist. But validity is defined in terms of *truth* which is perhaps the biggest philosophical topic. A discussion about what we mean by *truth*, which could then define validity, could only be done via the methods of argumentation, rhetoric, and persuasion.

<sup>2</sup> Plato. *Theaetetus*. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992. 11-2.

<sup>3</sup> Plato. *Sophist*. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993. 12.

The distinction between philosophy and sophistry can be explained in terms of aims; the philosopher aims at truth—one way or another—whereas the sophist aims at persuasion.

### **The Philosopher is Indistinguishable from the Sophist**

The glaring criticism facing the sophist is his insincerity, that his aim is persuasion rather than truth. Accordingly, we ought to be suspicious of his enterprise. The clients, the young people seeking wisdom, of course expect nothing less than what is truthful. Yet the sophist may or may not offer them this, but regardless of this fact, he will pretend as if his words are truth. There is no other way to determine the truth of his words besides the arguments he gives versus your own; truth is determined by nothing more than skill in argumentation and rhetoric. The more intelligent person, naturally, is capable of making the weaker argument seem stronger. This is the danger of engaging in debate with the sophist, that you might enter the argument believing in something true, then leave the debate believing something false. We might regard the sophist as a magician for he deals with appearances and illusions, but the consequences are not merely for the sake of entertainment; they are potentially life changing and for that reason he should also be regarded as a con-artist.

The philosopher also utilizes rhetoric and the method of argumentation. When we put the distinction into practice, it is unclear who is a philosopher and who is not. Who really seeks the truth, and how can we distinguish them from who merely seeks to persuade you, when the very methods of seeking truth consist in argumentation and rhetoric? I observe that the final definition of the sophist possesses no essential difference from my understanding of a philosopher. All that could be said of the sophist could be said of a bad philosopher, and perhaps sometimes even a good philosopher. Consider this description of the sophist,

Imitation of the contrary-speech-producing, insincere and unknowing sort, of the appearance-making kind of copy-making, the word-juggling part of production that's marked off as human and not divine.<sup>4</sup>

The sophist is one who is skillful in the art of causing self-contradiction. However, self-contradictions often mark the existence of a *reductio ad absurdum*. This skill is evident in philosophers as much as sophists. The second point, that the sophist creates illusory problems by manipulating language is more promising, yet still it cannot be said that the philosopher does not

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 65.

practice something of this sort. Indeed, many philosophers have found themselves tangled in confusions and absurdities simply because they were not using language properly. It seems as though the sophist is nothing but a mistaken philosopher. But who is mistaken is a matter of argument and debate; it is not obvious what counts as sophistry and what counts as philosophy when we attempt to apply the distinction to specific cases.<sup>5</sup>

The methods of the sophist seem to be the same as the methods of the philosopher. But the essential difference is often thought to be their aims. The sophist aims at persuasion, but the philosopher aims at truth. However, the distinction is problematic because when used in application, it is impossible to determine who aims at what. My experience in philosophy has been a bombardment of rhetoric and persuasion, at conferences, in classrooms, and in journal articles. The source of the problem, I think, is the fact that the aims of truth and persuasion are not mutually exclusive. One who seeks true knowledge might also aim to persuade you, and one who seeks to persuade you might also seek to know the truth. This is an example of *the problem of distinction*. The aim of truth does not adequately distinguish philosophy from sophistry.

One might simply allow that the aims of truth and persuasion are mutually compatible, and given the usual methods and practices that philosophers engage in, the two aims usually come as a package. Granting that, there is another problem. Philosophers don't agree on what truth is in the first place. Some philosophers believe in the correspondence theory of truth that all propositions must correspond to the world in some way. Deflationary theories of truth suppose that what we mean by a 'true proposition' is simply to assert that proposition. Skeptics deny that there is any truth to be had at all. Platonists think that truth exists in some abstract realm of ideas. Now if all philosophers seek truth, but each philosopher has a different philosophy about what truth is, in what sense do we mean that all philosophers seek truth? This puzzle is an example of *the problem of unification*. Philosophers do not seem to be unified by a common goal, nevertheless it does seem like philosophers are unified by *something*. One of the most important goals of meta-philosophy, as I see it, is to uncover what unifies philosophy in general.

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<sup>5</sup> One might say, nevertheless, there *is* still a distinction between them. They might say that the sophist is motivated to persuade you, and the philosopher is motivated to know the truth even though we may not be able to discern who the sophist is, since sophists are very deceptive. But what reason is there to believe in a distinction that we cannot actually apply in practice? 'Sophist' is merely a title we give to philosophers that we disagree with so vociferously that we cannot cope with the fact that they purport to be part of the same discipline as us.

## 1.12: The Aim to Establish a Foundation for Knowledge

One might suppose that the aim of philosophy is to establish the foundation of knowledge in general. The epistemological inquiry has been at the forefront of modern philosophical inquiry since Descartes. We will examine Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* and see if there is some insight there for understanding the nature of philosophy. It seems to be a plausible idea, that if we are to understand the nature of philosophy in general, that we ought to turn our attention to the root of all philosophical inquiry, that branch of philosophy that lays the foundation for all knowledge in general. Given that the most general aim of philosophy is knowledge, a deeper examination of the epistemological question, 'how do I know?' should be beneficial. However, the Cartesian project to establish the foundation of knowledge was a failed project.

First, I will note that Descartes does not make the explicit argument that epistemology is the branch of philosophy that lays the foundation of all inquiry. Rather he simply begins there. His reason for beginning with the epistemological question is evident by his first remarks, "Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood..."<sup>6</sup> The issue is, 'how do we know that any of our present beliefs are true when in the past we have found that a great deal of our beliefs were in fact false?' This is a worthy question, and Descartes endeavors to answer it by beginning with the most radical possible skepticism, and from this state of un-knowing, he searches for some indubitable truth that could set the foundation of all his beliefs in general.

Descartes begins his inquiry with skepticism,

I will suppose then, that everything I see is spurious. I will believe that my memory tells me lies, and that none of the things that it reports ever happened. I have no senses. Body, shape, extension, movement and place are chimeras. So what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain.<sup>7</sup>

It is a common epistemological conception of philosophy that philosophical inquiry begins with a state of uncertainty, and by asking questions and through the act of reasoning, we come to an understanding and achieve knowledge. Descartes describes the beginning of philosophical

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<sup>6</sup> Descartes, Rene. "Meditations on First Philosophy." *The Elements of Philosophy*. Ed. Cahn, S. Siegel and S. Gendler, T. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 351.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 354.

inquiry thus, “It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top.”<sup>8</sup> And indeed, this is the state of confusion and uncertainty we find ourselves in when we ask questions that we do not know the answer to. There is an important sense in which this describes the phenomenological nature of philosophical inquiry, and what draws many of us to philosophy is that we are compelled by these questions, we are disturbed by the state they leave us in, and as curious beings we naturally seek an answer. One of the reasons why Descartes’ meditations are so influential is that thoughtful people can relate to the perplexity that Descartes finds himself in.

From this state of uncertainty, Descartes searches for something certain, something to grab hold of amidst the deep whirlpool to ground himself, so he might make sense of something, of anything. He writes,

Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed... So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.<sup>9</sup>

Here we see that philosophy begins with the cogito. Prior to the certainty of my own existence, all beliefs were ungrounded, and this might explain the reason why thinkers throughout history have struggled to find any agreement. What the cogito means for philosophy is that philosophers can now agree on one undeniable truth that could establish the foundation for knowledge. Philosophers no longer need swim in the abyss of uncertainty. Descartes’ meditations marked the epistemological turn in philosophy; the proper starting point of philosophical inquiry.

### **On the Aim of Knowledge**

To suppose that the aim of philosophy is knowledge does not unify the discipline of philosophy, nor does it distinguish it from other disciplines of inquiry. There are many things everyone would like to know; not everyone would like to know the same things. The epistemological aim of philosophy does not specify any sort of knowledge in particular, rather it merely stipulates that philosophers seek knowledge in general. But it is not true that philosophers exclusively seek knowledge in general, since all people seek knowledge in general; all people at

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 354.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 354.

some point would like to know something. Nor is it the case that philosophers are interested in knowing *everything* in general. Some philosophers are not even interested in the foundation of knowledge, and many contemporary philosophers deny that there is a foundation for our beliefs.<sup>10</sup> The aim to determine the foundation of knowledge is too narrow since it could not unify the discipline in general. There is not any universal domain of knowledge that all philosophers aim at, rather, philosophers are interested in all sorts of things many of which have nothing to do with one another. The conception that philosophy aims at knowledge fails to specify what *kind* of knowledge philosophers are interested in, and it fails to unify the various branches of philosophy apart from the sciences or any other discipline of inquiry, since all disciplines seek knowledge. We are left wondering; knowledge of what?

One might argue that philosophy aims at knowledge in general, and to demand a specification for what kind of knowledge philosophy aims at would be inappropriate. If we want to know what kind of knowledge philosophers aim at, then go ask specific philosophers and they will tell you. However, this response sheds no light on the fact that when we ask specific philosophers what sort of knowledge they are interested in, we get such radically different answers that it seems implausible that it could be the topics which they study that qualifies them as situated within one discipline called philosophy. Then of course, the only kind of knowledge that could unify the broad range of philosophical topics is knowledge in general. But if this is so, then all the sciences and other disciplines of inquiry are philosophical disciplines because they all aim at knowledge. There might be some sense in which this is true, since PhD does stand for ‘doctor of philosophy’; however, there seems to be another sense in which epistemology or ethics is a branch of philosophy in a way that biology or psychology are not. The aim of knowledge gives us no aid in making sense of these distinctions—on the one hand we want to say that philosophy aims at knowledge in general, but on the other we want to say that there are only certain topics that are properly called philosophical.

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<sup>10</sup> Cappelen, Williamson, Hacker forthcoming deny that there is a foundation for our beliefs. Cappelen and Hacker, influenced by the ordinary language tradition and the later Wittgenstein, deny a foundation. Cappelen argues that intuitions do not play an ultimate justificatory role in philosophy, Hacker believes that the history of philosophical projects that aimed to determine the ultimate foundation for knowledge have all failed. Williamson believes that there is no branch of philosophy that plays an organizing role for all philosophy that enjoys some special status.

### **1.13: On the Subject Matter of Philosophy**

All disciplines of inquiry have a subject matter. The subject matter of biology is living organisms; physics, the physical world; psychology, the human psyche; sociology, social phenomena; mathematics, numbers; and etc. But when we turn to philosophy, no obvious subject matter comes to mind. In fact, it seems as though all the subjects of all disciplines of inquiry are in some sense also the subject matter of philosophy. This is due to the fact that there is a philosophy *of* any discipline. If we could determine what the subject matter of philosophy is—that topic that all philosophy aims to acquire knowledge of—then it would seem like we are on the right track towards figuring out just what it is that philosophers are trying to do. One plausible candidate for the subject matter is synthetic a priori knowledge.<sup>11</sup> We might formulate it as an essential characteristic of philosophy in general. It would look something like this: ‘all philosophy is concerned about synthetic a priori knowledge.’ But this candidate, like all candidates for the subject matter of philosophy in general, is inadequate.

#### **Is the Subject Matter of Philosophy Synthetic A Priori Knowledge?**

There are two significant distinctions that philosophers have been using to sort out the different kinds of knowledge. The first is the distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori* propositions. Loosely speaking, *a priori* means independent of experience, and *a posteriori* means dependent on experience. For example, mathematical knowledge is thought to be *a priori* knowledge because it does not rely on any empirical observation or experience to justify it. ‘The bus is red’ is an *a posteriori* proposition, since one must observe a red bus in order to know the truth value of the proposition.

The second distinction is analytic versus synthetic judgments. Kant says,

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<sup>11</sup> There are other candidates, but for the sake of brevity and space I can only consider one. Some other candidates that I’ve heard tossed around are: ‘all philosophical knowledge is normative’, ‘all philosophical knowledge is conceptual’, ‘all philosophical knowledge is linguistic’, ‘all philosophical knowledge is fundamental’, ‘all philosophical knowledge is general’, ‘all philosophical knowledge is speculative’, and etc. I’m not sure how to go about espousing all the various ways of thinking about philosophical knowledge, so I’ll leave it to the reader’s imagination. But I hope that my discussion of synthetic a priori knowledge is generalizable to other candidate types of knowledge.

Either the predicate B belongs to the subject A as something that is (covertly) contained in this concept A; or B, though connected with concept A, lies quite outside it. In the first case I call the judgment *analytic*; in the second, *synthetic*.<sup>12</sup>

An analytic statement is known in virtue of understanding the words, where one concept is thought to be already ‘contained’ within another concept. A synthetic statement makes a substantive judgment about the world, where two unrelated concepts are brought together. According to Hume, this is to say that an analytic proposition is about a relation of ideas, and a synthetic proposition concerns matter of facts.<sup>13</sup> For example, ‘a bachelor is an unmarried male’ is analytic because one may know the proposition merely by understanding it as a definition. ‘The bus is red’ is synthetic because the predicate ‘red’ is not contained in the concept ‘bus’, but we observe the bus which combines the concept with red.

It was commonly assumed that all analytic propositions were *a priori* and all synthetic propositions were *a posteriori*. However, Kant’s great insight was that synthetic *a priori* judgments are possible, and that was the source of many of Hume’s confusions and mistakes. So what is synthetic *a priori* knowledge? Synthetic *a priori* judgments are “judgements whose predicates are *not* contained in their subjects and which yet are logically independent of all judgements describing sense-experience.”<sup>14</sup> Kant thinks that the whole of mathematics, fundamental presuppositions of the natural sciences, and moral thought are synthetic *a priori* judgments. For example, the judgment, ‘Every change has a cause’, is synthetic *a priori*. It is *a priori* because it is known independently of experience, and it is synthetic because the predicate ‘cause’ is not contained within the subject ‘change’.

It would be a mistake to think that the idea of synthetic *a priori* knowledge is uncontroversial. As Korner points out,

This Kantian classification of propositions has been the subject of many unfavourable comments, some critics going so far as to see in it the root of a mistake which vitiates the whole critical philosophy.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kant, Immanuel. “The Nature of Knowledge.” *Philosophical Inquiry*. Ed. Adler, Jonathan and Elgin, Catherine. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2007. 27-28.

<sup>13</sup> Hume, David. *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Great Clarendon St., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 18.

<sup>14</sup> Korner, S. *Kant*. Bristol, Great Britain: Western Printing Services Ltd, 1955. 20.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 18.

Since my goal is merely to show that synthetic *a priori* knowledge is not the essential subject matter of philosophy, not to prove that Kant was wrong, I'll only describe some brief criticism to raise doubts about it.

I think the most serious concern for synthetic *a priori* knowledge is due to the fact that Kant's definition of it is too vague. Kant says that a synthetic *a priori* judgment is one where the predicate is *contained* within the subject. Just what does it mean for a predicate to be contained within a subject? Korner thinks the issue can be dealt with. He says, "... Kant's meaning is clear: the subject of a judgement *contains* its predicate if, and only if, the negation of the judgement is a contradiction in terms."<sup>16</sup> He gives an example, 'colour' is contained in 'green', and so if we denied that green were a colour we would be contradicting ourselves. However, I think this example is deniable without contradiction. For example, one might say: 'green is not a colour, it's a light wave.' Although there might be something misleading or mistaken about saying that, I do not think it is a contradiction. Or consider Kant's example that 'all bodies are extended'. It is possible for someone to deny that there is any such thing as extension and therefore all bodies are not extended. To insist that the opponent *has* contradicted himself nevertheless requires at least some justification. That justification could not be 'extension is contained within the concept of body.'

Kant's general project in the *Critique* was another attempt to determine the foundation of knowledge. However, if it turns out that the very notion of synthetic *a priori* judgments is mistaken, then Kant's project would be a great blunder. As Korner comments, "if there are no such judgements then Kant's central question formulates a pseudo-problem, and his answer is but another dream of another ghost-seer."<sup>17</sup> The goal of Kant's transcendental philosophy was to determine the possibility of experience. To explain how synthetic *a priori* knowledge was possible is an important component to his project. Without it he would not have the tools to combat Hume's skepticism about causality. After all, Kant's categories are alleged to be synthetic *a priori*, and therefore, if synthetic *a priori* is broken-backed for some reason, then so

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 22.

too is Kant's project to explain the possibility of experience. If the categories are *not* synthetic *a priori*, but are reducible to Hume's fork,<sup>18</sup> then Kant's project would be a complete failure.

The notion of the synthetic *a priori* is philosophically controversial. As a candidate for the most general subject matter of philosophy it could only be problematic.<sup>19</sup> What we'd have are many philosophers denying that they study the same subject as other philosophers, and consequently, the subject matter would fail to unify the discipline. Other candidate subject matters can be suggested; however, I believe that they would fall victim to the same general problem, namely, that all candidate subject matters will be philosophical topics and therefore subject to philosophical controversy. The aim of philosophy in general cannot be formulated as a search for knowledge about some common subject matter. There are many topics which philosophers are interested in, but given how diverse they are, it would be impossible to unify the topics of philosophy under one general subject matter.

### **1.14: No Universal Aim of Philosophy**

What we have found in this brief investigation is that the aim of philosophy is elusive. It seems as though a universal aim could be given, but due to the nature of philosophical inquiry any aim considered will be subject to philosophical controversy. The aim of truth fails to distinguish between the philosopher and the sophist, the aim of knowledge fails to distinguish philosophy from other disciplines of inquiry in general, and the aim to establish a foundation for knowledge in general is a project that has failed every attempt in history. Nor does philosophy have any obvious universal subject matter that could indicate what kind of knowledge philosophers are interested in. Certainly, many potential aims could be suggested that I have not considered, but I am confident that every candidate will fail to unify the discipline in general, and that any aim too general will risk the problem of distinguishability. Unity in identity is always trivial and insignificant if it fails to distinguish the identity in question from other relevant disciplines. This is the problem we observe even if the aims of truth and knowledge are

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<sup>18</sup> That all human knowledge can be divided into two types of propositions, vis., relations of ideas and matters of fact, and the former are analytic and *a priori* while the latter are synthetic and *a posteriori*.

<sup>19</sup> That's not to imply that Kant thought it was the subject matter of philosophy. This exercise is merely an attempt to formulate a domain for philosophical knowledge, and to show by the impossibility of it, that any alternative subject matter would also be implausible. I assume that my readers will attempt to contemplate the subject matter of philosophy for themselves and find the same conclusions.

not philosophically problematic in their own right, as they would nevertheless fail to satisfy the criterion of distinguishability. So we conclude that there is not a universal aim of philosophy.

The history of philosophy is filled with ambitious attempts to determine the foundation for knowledge. That's a project that can be attributed to Plato, Descartes, and Kant, but there are other movements in philosophy that have similar goals. There are philosophers today that call themselves Platonists who believe that abstract truth resides in a realm of ideas. The foundation for knowledge for the Platonist, metaphorically speaking, is not at our feet, but high in the sky. The Cartesian puts the foundation for knowledge in our most basic and certain beliefs at the very bottom of our justificatory chain. The Kantian puts the foundation for knowledge in the transcendental, i.e., in the explanation of the possibility of experience, without which we could not understand anything at all. There are many ways of conceiving of the foundation for knowledge in philosophy; however, they all have one thing in common, they are all philosophically controversial and have not achieved consensus. It would be audacious of us to suppose that the general aim of philosophy is to discover the foundation for knowledge. It might be one task that philosophers are interested in achieving, but it should also be possible for us to reject that traditional project and find a new aim in philosophy.

I suggest that the question of philosophical aim must be left open. If it's true that there is no universal aim of philosophy in general, then perhaps we should be pluralistic about our aims in philosophy. The aims of philosophy are broad and usually contested in some way, and that's due to the fact that our aims in philosophy are themselves philosophical topics.

## Section 2: Is Philosophy a Science?

### 1.21: A Response to Williamson's Philosophy of Philosophy

Timothy Williamson argues in his book, *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, that philosophy is a science. But given that philosophers disagree about what the aim of philosophy is, one might wonder if philosophy can really be a science. Scientists seem to enjoy more widespread agreement about the results in their discipline than philosophers do. Williamson argues that disagreement in philosophy does not warrant the belief that philosophy is different in kind from the sciences. I will argue for the contrary. There are two goals I wish to accomplish: 1) to reject any proper object of philosophy, and 2) to reject any conception of philosophy understood as

science. The progress we suppose science achieves is not something that philosophy can replicate. A well-established science has a proper object of study; philosophy does not. Philosophy fails to have a proper object of inquiry because, in principle, philosophers can disagree about anything including the proper object itself. If my arguments go through, I hope to show that philosophy is fundamentally different in kind from the sciences.

Many philosophers think that the discipline of philosophy is not quite like other disciplines of inquiry. They think that philosophy is exceptional.<sup>20</sup> Bertrand Russell thought that philosophy is the residue of the sciences, i.e., "... those questions which are already capable of definite answers are placed in the sciences, while those only to which, at present, no definite answer can be given, remain to form the residue which is called philosophy."<sup>21</sup> Historically prior to science, philosophy was the primary source of knowledge about the world. Now, due to the success of science, the identity of philosophy is in question as it is no longer the leading authority regarding human knowledge. It is uncommon to find laypersons seeking the advice of philosophers beyond the catch phrases found on their fridge magnets.

As philosophers, we are left wondering: "What is the aim of philosophy? What sort of knowledge does philosophy achieve? Is there a proper object of philosophy?" Michael Dummett, following the influence of Frege, supposed that we have finally found what might be considered the foundation for establishing the proper method of philosophy. He says, "Only with Frege was the proper object of philosophy finally established; namely, first, that the goal of philosophy is the analysis of the structure of *thought*...."<sup>22</sup> The proper object of philosophy according to Dummett is linguistic or conceptual truth and the foundational method of philosophy is linguistic and conceptual analysis.

If we survey the history of philosophy we observe that many great philosophers have supposed that they had found the method of philosophy which would finally establish a true philosophical vision. Dummett writes,

Husserl believed passionately that he at last held the key which would unlock every philosophical door; the disciples of Kant ascribed to him the achievement of devising a

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<sup>20</sup> The later Wittgenstein, Hacker, Dietrich, Moody, to name a few.

<sup>21</sup> Russell, Bertrand. *The Problems of Philosophy*. Watchmaker Publishing, 1929. 110

<sup>22</sup> Dummett, M.A.E. "Can Analytic Philosophy be Systematic, and Ought it to Be?" *Truth and Other Enigmas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978. 458.

correct philosophical methodology; Spinoza believed that he was doing for philosophy what Euclid had done for geometry; and, before him, Descartes supposed that he had uncovered the one and only proper philosophical method.<sup>23</sup>

Given this strong historical evidence, doubt about whether or not Frege has succeeded in establishing the proper object and method of philosophy is almost compulsory. Dummett replies, “time will tell.”<sup>24</sup>

Williamson, following Dummett and Wiggins in the Wykeham Chair of Logic at Oxford University, argues that the linguistic turn in philosophy was a mistake. The object of philosophy cannot be linguistic truth; this would severely impoverish the domain of philosophical knowledge. Dummett’s belief that we have finally found the proper object of philosophy has not lasted thirty five years; time has now told. Although Williamson strongly rejects the linguistic turn in philosophy, he still maintains a similar tradition of philosophy under the influence of Frege, as he regards Frege as the exemplar of clear philosophical methodology. Williamson rejects the *proper object*<sup>25</sup> of philosophy, but maintains the *methods* of linguistic analysis in practice. If Williamson is right in his criticism of the linguistic turn, then we are left asking: “What is the proper object of philosophy?” According to Williamson, philosophy is the study of all sorts of things, and there is not any one object of inquiry that is prior to all the others. Despite the fact that there is no proper object of philosophy, Williamson still believes that philosophy can and ought to be a science. I agree with the former point, but deny the latter. What I hope to offer is an argument why philosophy cannot be a science.<sup>26</sup>

Let us first consider what it means to be a science. To provide a basic explanation of any science, I recommend, is to first specify a generally agreed object and aim of inquiry. The object and aim of inquiry are the answers we might give to the questions: “What does the discipline study? What does the inquiry hope to achieve?” Let’s take biology, for example. We might answer the former question by saying: “Biology studies living organisms.” To the latter question we might reply: “Biology aims to achieve knowledge about the living world.” I observe that

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 458.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 458.

<sup>25</sup> That philosophy is primarily concerned about linguistic truth.

<sup>26</sup> I should indicate that my use of the word ‘science’ is not the same of the German word ‘Wissenschaft’ which has a broader usage and can describe any study that involves systematic research as a dynamic process of learning. My use of the word ‘science’ is narrower, and refers to a specific set of disciplines properly thought to be sciences. This includes what is known as the hard or pure sciences and the soft or social sciences.

most students of science and laypersons have no non-trivial qualms concerning the object of biology, and persons who call themselves biologists do not engage in any serious controversy about what it is that biology studies. I assume a necessary characteristic of a science to be a generally agreed proper object of inquiry. Without agreement in object of inquiry there could not be any unified discipline and practice, but rather, it would be an amalgamation of various projects and interests without any principled foundation.

I should take a pause here to clarify the meaning of some terms. Firstly, a proper object would specify an aim for philosophy, i.e., if the proper object is linguistic truth, then the aim of inquiry would be to discover knowledge of language. The term ‘proper object’ comes from Dummett, by which he means that the proper object of philosophy is linguistic truth. His reason for calling it *proper*, is to single out linguistic truth among whatever other sorts of truths philosophers might be interested in. There are many objects that philosophers direct inquiry towards, nevertheless, according to Dummett, linguistic truth is the one and only *proper* object. Now for the sciences, take biology for example, I believe that the proper object merely refers to the subject matter of the science, namely, the living world. In fact, the term *proper* is not significant in characterizing the subject matter of biology because there is only *one* general subject matter of biology, and it is obvious and non-controversial. In philosophy, however, there are many subject matters, and no obvious general all-encompassing subject matter. Therefore, when Dummett tries to specify a ‘primary’ subject matter of philosophy, he uses the term *proper* to give some special status to linguistic truth among the various other sorts of truth we might be interested in. So for the sake of clarity, I suggest that the word ‘object’ be interpreted as synonymous with ‘subject matter’, and the word ‘proper’ be interpreted as a signification of the *primary* subject matter of a discipline.

Given that a basic characteristic of any creditable science is a proper object of study, i.e., a subject matter, one should think that if philosophy really is a science, then we ought to be able to specify the proper object of study. I ask again: “Philosophy is the study of—what?” Philosophy is the study of many different things, and to suppose any particular kind of object is the proper object of philosophical inquiry would be a mistake. If we survey the history of philosophy, at each pivotal turn, we observe a change in the conception of ‘first philosophy’. Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, put epistemology as first philosophy, and before

him, philosophers under the influence of Aristotle thought metaphysics was first philosophy. Nowadays we observe the common way of dealing with philosophical problems is through linguistic analysis. For the linguistic turn, philosophy of language has become the new ‘first philosophy’, but if history is capable of teaching us any lessons, then we should not suppose that our current favourite way of doing philosophy is the privileged foundational branch of philosophy that will guide the future of all proper philosophy. If there is no branch of philosophy that plays the role of first philosophy, then the case for philosophy understood as science would be a harder sell, for there would be no branch that could unify the various philosophical topics.

Williamson asks us, “If mathematics is a science, why not philosophy too?”<sup>27</sup> Williamson addresses those who exclude philosophy from science because the method of science is empirical, while the method of philosophy is done in the armchair. Indeed, if mathematics is a science, surely it is not an empirical one. Empirical observation is not a necessary condition for all scientific inquiry. Williamson indicates similarities between mathematics and philosophy, both are performed from the armchair, both employ evidence in various conceptual forms whether that be proofs, thought experiments, or logical reasoning. According to Williamson, when we can, we should model our philosophical methods on the methods of mathematics.

The fact that philosophy is not strictly speaking an empirical discipline does not disqualify it as a candidate for science. But there are more substantial reasons why we might think philosophy is not a science. For example, philosophers have such widespread disagreement regarding theory and evidence. Williamson is not convinced by that either, he trivializes disagreement in philosophy. He writes,

The residual levels of disagreement in judgments between trained philosophers do not warrant wholesale skepticism about the method of thought experiments. Naturally, philosophical debates focus on points of disagreement, not on points of agreement. Most intellectual disciplines have learned to live with significant levels of disagreement between trained practitioners, concerning both theory and observation: philosophy is not as exceptional in this respect as some pretend.<sup>28</sup>

Williamson’s argument that philosophy is a science rests on methodological similarities. The fact that philosophers disagree about theories and observations does not make philosophy exceptional in comparison to science. But what does make philosophy exceptional, is not merely the fact that

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 191.

philosophers disagree about various theories within the academy, but philosophers also disagree about the proper object and aim of philosophy itself. The proper object of philosophy is a valid candidate for agreement and disagreement among philosophers.<sup>29</sup> By comparison, in any well-established science, the object of inquiry is already given by agreement in the scientific community. If a biologist suddenly decided that his object of inquiry is electromagnetic waves, then our biologist would be exiting the domain of biology's inquiry. Mathematics also has a generally established subject matter. Philosophy, however, has no generally agreed proper object of inquiry.

### **1.22: An Argument that Philosophy is not Science**

The following is my argument for the thesis that philosophy is not a science. Any well-established science, if it is a science, must have an object of inquiry or domain of study. The proper object of science in general is the natural world, and all the specific sciences aim to discover knowledge of some restricted domain of the natural world. A proper object is necessary for the unity of the discipline in general. Consider my thesis:

*Philosophers can, in principle, disagree about anything including the proper object of philosophy.*

There is nothing that a philosopher could deny that would necessarily disqualify him from the domain of philosophical inquiry. If philosophers can disagree on anything, then they can disagree on the object of philosophy whilst at the same time maintain the status of being a philosopher. In contrast, if a biologist disputes the object of biology, she may very well cease to be a biologist altogether.

Suppose that there exists some proposition such that if you are a philosopher you must agree with the proposition.<sup>30</sup> Any such proposition would stand as a necessary condition that all

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<sup>29</sup> Of course, biologists might also have notions of what's primary in biology. For example, one might suppose that evolutionary biology is prior to genetics in terms of levels of explanation. Maybe some biologists disagree about this. But there is still a general agreement on the proper object of biology, namely, the living world. There is no analogously non-controversial proper object of philosophy.

<sup>30</sup> For example, Dummett suggests linguistic truth is the proper object of philosophy. Those who deny that the proper object of philosophy are excluded from the discipline on that basis. In his article, Dummett is of course addressing *analytic* philosophy exclusively, however my criticism will still apply in this case. Analytic Philosophy will be conditioned by some proposition such that anyone who wants to be an analytic philosopher cannot seriously bring the tenants of analytic philosophy into question without leaving the discipline.

philosophers must agree to in order to be philosophers. But this would be impossible because it would be contrary to the ideals of critical reflection and philosophical freedom. It is every philosopher's prerogative to question any assumption, and therefore, there cannot be a proposition that is unobjectionable.<sup>31</sup> In short, there cannot be a universal philosopher's creed that all philosophers must assent to, since the very nature of philosophy resides in our capability to question any assumption. If it's true that philosophers can disagree about anything, then this would explain why philosophers cannot have a universal aim nor a proper object.

Williamson would agree that there is no proper object of philosophy. He writes, "no single branch of philosophy [plays the organizing role] ... nor is any one philosophical method currently treated as a panacea for philosophical ills, with consequent privileges for its home branch."<sup>32</sup> Williamson and I agree on the rejection of any notion of 'first philosophy', the idea of some kind of philosophy that is prior to every other kind of philosophy, or an area of philosophy that is fundamental to all philosophical inquiry. But what Williamson seems to neglect is my suggestion that any well-established science ought to have a generally agreed object. On my view, philosophy's lack of proper object creates a serious conceptual problem when thinking of philosophy as a science, but Williamson never addresses this point. He suggests that progress has been achieved in philosophy by citing the success of modal logic; "we know far more about possibility and necessity than was known before the development of modern modal logic and associated work in philosophy."<sup>33</sup> With the progress philosophy has made in logic, we can extend that progress to other branches of philosophy, for example metaphysics. Advancements in logic offers philosophers more rigorous and precise methods for doing philosophy. However, Williamson's attitude towards the success of logic seems contrary to his claim that no branch of philosophy plays an organizing role or is treated as a panacea for philosophical ills. When reading Williamson's book, it is obvious that logic is exactly that. Many philosophical ills can be remedied simply by recognizing the fallacies that underlie them. The general conception of what I wish to call the 'logical turn' in philosophy, is the conception that a deeper appreciation and awareness of logic is the remedy for philosophical problems.

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<sup>31</sup> One might be tempted to suppose we can deny this very proposition, that philosophers can deny any proposition. But I think that could only affirm the thesis that philosophers can deny any proposition.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 280.

In response to the progress of logic I ask, ‘does the progress in logic indicate progress in philosophy?’ The success of logic will be useful to philosophers in the same way that mathematics is useful to physicists; however, progress in math does not equal progress in physics, and likewise, progress in logic does not equal progress in philosophy. Williamson asks, “If mathematics can be a science, why not philosophy?” But a more appropriate question might have been, “If mathematics can be a science, why not logic?” I say, progress in logic is progress in logic, and this does not imply progress in philosophy. No doubt the advancements made in logic will be useful to philosophers, however, the reason why philosophy has not made progress throughout history is not because logic had not yet matured, but because the proper object and aim of philosophical inquiry is subject to perpetual debate.

Williamson believes that despite the fact that philosophy has no proper object, nor does it have a universal methodology that includes all and only philosophical thinking, philosophy is still capable of being a science and making progress. In Chapter 7 of *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, he discusses evidence in philosophy. Some would argue that philosophy does not qualify as a science on the basis that philosophers disagree on their evidence. In response, Williamson says, “The predicament is not special to philosophy, although it may be worse there than elsewhere. It is not in practice fatal to other disciplines; it is not in principle fatal to philosophy.”<sup>34</sup> Historians can be challenged by conspiracy theories which are also historical theories. Indeed, dispute over evidence is not unique to philosophy. But we might well wonder, why is dispute over evidence observably worse in philosophy? One obvious answer is because philosophers can disagree about anything and still be doing philosophy. A scientist can only dispute evidence to a certain extent, for if a scientist denies enough evidence, she will be excluded from the scientific community. Hans-Johann Glock writes, “someone with *radically deviant methods*, who for example totally disregards observation and experiment in favour of aesthetic considerations, simply ceases to be a scientist.”<sup>35</sup> It’s not that philosophers do not agree on evidence that excludes them from science; rather, it’s that philosophers disagree about philosophy itself, i.e., what the proper aims and methods of philosophical inquiry are. There has not been any general consensus on the object of philosophy; it is no wonder philosophy has not

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 213.

<sup>35</sup> Glock, Hans-Johann. *What is Analytic Philosophy?* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 7.

made progress like the sciences. On my view, this is not as bad as it sounds, since we should not expect philosophy to proceed in the way sciences does.

It is not scientific to suppose as a general principle that evidence cannot confirm a theory. There is no similarly discreditable anti-philosophical utterance. One might try to imagine a statement that would exclude them from philosophy, for example, ‘I don’t think it is important to think about what I believe.’ But even this is a philosophical view, albeit a bad one. Someone could add to it, ‘The reason I don’t reflect on my beliefs is because I have seen people who spend too much time thinking, and they are quite a confused bunch.’ But the more one tries to defend their anti-philosophical beliefs, the more philosophical it ends up being. The only way to avoid philosophy is to stop asking questions and trying to answer them. The true death of philosophy is simply ceasing to care.

Colin McGinn recently argued that philosophy is a science. On his view, “So long as the questions are real and the standards of investigation are rigorous, we can still claim the title ‘science.’”<sup>36</sup> McGinn’s conception of science puts emphasis on rigor, organization, and systemization.<sup>37</sup> His arguments presuppose that philosophy is conceptual analysis; “philosophy is conceptual analysis (in a suitably broad sense). I won’t be defending that view here; I will presuppose it.”<sup>38</sup> He assumes that conceptual analysis is the proper method of philosophy, and with that, the proper object would be conceptual truth. But Williamson has argued that there is more to philosophy than conceptual analysis, and that the linguistic turn is a mistake. Much more would need to be said about what conceptual analysis is in order to explain the depth of these disagreements, but what we can say is that philosophers do not agree on what the proper object of philosophy is, which I take to be a necessary condition for a scientific discipline. Any attempt to specify the proper object of philosophy is philosophically controversial. In contrast to science, biologists and chemists do not seem to have any qualms over *what it is they study*, namely, living

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<sup>36</sup> McGinn, Colin. “The Science of Philosophy.” *Metaphilosophy*. Vol. 46, No. 1, pages 84-103, January 2015. 91.

<sup>37</sup> On McGinn’s broad conception of ‘science’, philosophy is only ‘scientific’ in the sense that a watchmaker might be thought to be ‘scientific’, i.e., his practice is rigorous, organized, methodical, and systematic. Indeed, even a tennis player can be thought to be ‘scientific’ about tennis. But being scientific in this sense does not imply that playing tennis, watchmaking, carpentry, playing chess, painting, and many other activities are real sciences even though each can be described as ‘scientific’. No matter how rigorous or systematic philosophy might be, it will never be a science.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 84.

organisms and physical elements, but philosophers *do* have qualms over what the proper object of philosophical inquiry is.

One might suggest that philosophy in general is not a science, but maintain that *analytic* philosophy is a science. The analytic philosopher wants to say, “My philosophy is scientific, whereas continental philosophy and other sorts are not.” However, my argument that philosophy in general is not science applies just as well to analytic philosophy. I ask, what justifies the claim that analytic philosophy is a science when analytic philosophers have no generally agreed aim and object? If analytic philosophers decide that there is something they all agree on which cannot be disputed without leaving the discipline, then they will have committed a dogmatic sin against philosophy. They would violate the philosophers’ prerogative to bring every assumption into question. An analytic philosopher ought to be able to question the fundamental assumptions of his own discipline<sup>39</sup>, if that discipline is to remain philosophy at all. Analytic meta-philosophers can disagree about the proper object, and as we have seen, Dummett supposed the linguistic turn established the proper object of analytic philosophy, whereas Williamson strongly rejects this thesis. Dummett might be prepared to exclude Williamson from analytic philosophy, but if so, then so much the worse for analytic philosophy.

As I have argued, it is essential to philosophy that every claim is in principle questionable. What this insight means for the nature of philosophy is that historical turns in philosophy come and go, as what takes priority in philosophical inquiry is subject to philosophical dispute. One might respond that science too undergoes turning points, but when revolutionary theories come about in science, they do not change the fundamental nature of science itself, rather the method of science accommodates revolutionary scientific theories. If science found that quantum mechanics was wrong, and a radical new theory took its place, this would not affect our fundamental conception of science, instead it would confirm our conception that science proceeds on the basis of finding evidence and verifying, modifying, or rejecting hypotheses. In contrast, when philosophy undergoes a turn, the very meaning of philosophy

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<sup>39</sup> It might be thought then, that the proper aim of philosophy is to question fundamental assumptions. But to that I think, *no*, since it is only one of the many things that philosophers do, since I don’t think it’s true that all philosophers question fundamental assumptions. It is possible to do philosophy without questioning a single assumption; that’s called being dogmatic. Questioning fundamental assumptions is a prerogative, meaning that it is something a philosopher *can* do, but not *must* do. Whether or not philosophers *should* do it, is a normative question, and of course I think philosophers should, yet there might be cases where some philosophers think otherwise.

changes with it since philosophy is capable of reconceiving its aims. To conceive of philosophy as a science is quite different from thinking of it as a disease to be cured. Hence, radical new meta-philosophical conceptions transform the meaning of philosophy itself, by changing the way we think about philosophical problems and changing the way we go about dealing with them.

An objection to my view is that some sciences do not, in fact, have a generally agreed proper object of inquiry. For example, perhaps some of the social sciences lack a proper object. There are various ‘brands’ of psychologists: some think that the proper object of psychology is human behavior, others think it’s the physical brain, others might think it’s emotions and mental states, and some might even think it’s the human soul. I grant this to be true; nevertheless, I think there is still a broader, general object that unifies all the various kinds of psychology, namely, the human psyche.<sup>40</sup> Of course, each psychologist might give a different story about what they think the human psyche *is*, but that’s not an impediment to the unity of the discipline in general. There is a general agreement that each branch of psychology offers some valuable knowledge about the psyche, and that’s what unifies the various branches of psychology. Philosophy, by contrast, has no proper object of inquiry. As much as we want to say that the object of philosophy is *truth*, a philosopher could still deny that that is their aim and still be a philosopher.<sup>41</sup> A psychologist does not have the same luxury; to reject the most general object of a science is to leave that domain of scientific inquiry. The easiest way to recognize the difference between philosophy and the sciences is by asking them what the subject matter of their discipline is. Philosophers give us all sorts of different answers to that question, but psychologists agree that the subject matter of their discipline in general is the psyche.

If mathematics can be a science, why not philosophy? I say, because of radical fundamental disagreement. It is essential to philosophy that we can disagree about anything, including our most basic assumptions about the aim of philosophy itself. This is what prevents philosophy from making progress in the same way as other disciplines, and it is the reason why

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<sup>40</sup> The meaning of ‘psyche’ borrowed from Wikipedia: “In psychology, the psyche /’səki/ is the totality of the human mind, conscious and unconscious. Psychology is the scientific or objective study of the psyche. The word has a long history of use in psychology and philosophy, dating back to ancient times, and represents one of the fundamental concepts for understanding human nature from a scientific point of view.”

<sup>41</sup> For example, a nihilist might say: ‘The notion of truth is a philosophical fantasy. We’re better off removing it from our vocabulary.’ And the skeptic might say: ‘It’s impossible to know if anything is true. I’ve never met anyone who succeeded in proving, demonstrating, showing, defining, or anything of this sort, that truth exists. So I don’t see any reason to believe in truth.’ It’s only philosophers that say things like this.

philosophy cannot be a science. Because of self-reflexive disagreement, philosophy does not progress, rather, it *transforms* by reconceiving the purpose of inquiry through critical self-reflection and argumentation. My argument rests on the assumption that a well-established science must have a proper object as a necessary condition for being a science. Since philosophy has no generally agreed proper object of inquiry, it must be regarded as a different kind of discipline than science, and we should not have the same expectations for philosophy.

### **1.23: The Diversity of Philosophical Aims**

One of the most important insights I have found through this inquiry is that there are multiple conceptions of the aim of philosophy. To many this will seem obvious, but what is significant is the problems that arise from the fact that there is no general unifying aim of philosophy and what this means for the discipline of philosophy in general. To help illuminate these problems, I ask, how do we make sense of cases where two meta-philosophical conceptions conflict with one another? Wittgenstein's meta-philosophy is one that conflicts with the traditional conception of philosophy in a radical way. Instead of thinking of the aim of philosophy in terms of a quest for knowledge and truth by asking questions and seeking answers, Wittgenstein suggests the aim of philosophy is rather to dissolve the question and to rid oneself of pseudo-questions that arise when we misuse language. According to the Wittgensteinian meta-philosophical conception, philosophical problems are treated as a disease, and it is our task to rid ourselves of them. This conception directly conflicts with traditional conceptions of philosophy: instead of seeking the true answer to the question, we are to find a way to dissolve the question, "What is your aim in philosophy? – To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle"<sup>42</sup>, Wittgenstein says.

Paul Horwich explains the Wittgensteinian meta-philosophical conception thus,

... our job is not to find out whether the phenomenon in question is possible, or to try to prove that it really is or really is not, or to discern, in light of the paradoxical considerations, what its true nature must be, but rather to remove the confusion that is responsible for the misguided philosophical argument.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2009. 110.

<sup>43</sup> Horwich, Paul. *Wittgenstein's Metaphilosophy*. Great Clarendon Street, Oxford. 2012. 5-6.

It should be obvious that Williamson and Horwich have conflicting meta-philosophical conceptions. Williamson conceives of the aim of philosophy more traditionally, that it is a scientific discipline like any other, that it is capable of progress, and that philosophical questions can be answered in the form of correct philosophical theories. Horwich on the other hand thinks that the traditional project of philosophy is irrational since the arguments and theories propounded in philosophy rest on mistaken linguistic analogies and overgeneralizations. It is not my task to determine which meta-philosophical conception is correct or more plausible, rather I simply wish to indicate an important problem that relates to my insight that there are many meta-philosophical conceptions within philosophy that conflict with one another. That problem is this: if the law of excluded middle is true, then it could not be the case that the aim of philosophy is both to create new theories which answer our questions and also to dissolve those questions that prompt us to create new theories. It is not hard to see that once we take note of the various conflicting and mutually exclusive meta-philosophical conceptions, it is logically inconsistent to think it is acceptable that philosophy has these conflicting aims. We might think that one conception must be wrong, either Horwich along with other deflationists and ordinary language philosophers have misconceived the aim of philosophy, or Williamson and the majority of the history of philosophy have been mistaken. But it seems absurd to say that since Wittgenstein is mistaken about the aim of philosophy, he consequently is also wrong about what philosophy is.

The dilemma is caused by the fact that our aims in philosophy are themselves philosophical topics. For any candidate aim, some philosophers might deny it altogether. In my mind, this is what makes philosophy exceptional to other disciplines of inquiry and it's the reason why philosophy is not a scientific discipline. It also explains the diversity of philosophical projects. For example, we might wonder, after surveying the history of philosophy, what is it that philosophers are trying to accomplish? As it turns out, philosophers of different philosophical traditions are trying to accomplish very different tasks. It cannot be said that there is some universal project that all philosophers subscribe to—or if there is, it seems highly implausible that it can be definitively specified without controversy. I think the lesson we can take from this is that there are many aims in philosophy, none of which stand as a necessary condition for participating in philosophy. Yet what qualifies an aim as a *philosophical* one has yet to be seen, and whether or not it is possible to say with adequate certainty just what it is that makes an aim

philosophical is an immensely large question. I can only say with confidence that our aims in philosophy are problematic.

It can also be suggested that one can do philosophy without having to know what the aim of philosophy is. One might also deny altogether that there is any aim to philosophy. This is true, but the worry I have is that we are forced to say that as philosophers we are not clear about what we are trying to accomplish as a discipline. Or more bluntly, we have no idea what we're doing. If it's possible for us to continue on in philosophy without any clear goal, I hardly think that's the way we ought to proceed. We ought to tackle the question head on with full force instead of proceeding without any clear sense of direction. Doing philosophy without an aim is like searching for something in the dark, not knowing what it is you're searching for, or whether or not there is even anything to be found.

## Conclusion

We have briefly reviewed some prominent conceptions of philosophy and topics related to our question. We found that each view had the theme that philosophy aims at knowledge in some way, but we were unable to determine what sort of knowledge philosophy aims at because there is no proper object of philosophy. There is a thin sense in which philosophy aims at knowledge, that is the sense in which all disciplines aim at knowledge, but when we attempt to determine a thicker meaning for this aim we are unable to specify any substantial essential properties of the aim of philosophy because the aim of philosophy is essentially contested. My official conclusion is that there is no universal aim of philosophy in general. Certainly, more substantial accounts can be attempted, and even enjoy widespread agreement and influence, but these accounts would merely amount to more specific types of philosophy and not an account of philosophy in general. As we have seen, there is Platonic philosophy, Cartesian philosophy, Kantian philosophy, and various uncountable other philosophies with innumerable divisions within themselves formed by the multitudes of interpretations. Many of these particular philosophies purport to establish the one and only proper foundation for all philosophy in general. Given that there are nearly infinite variations of different types of philosophical systems, it is no wonder that there cannot be a universal aim of all philosophy in general, something that all philosophical systems seek in common with each other. The spectrum of philosophical inquiry is simply too broad for that. There are many particular types and versions of philosophy,

many of which have their own unique aims, some share the same aims, while others take radically different aims. Since philosophers can disagree about anything, any attempt to provide a universal aim of philosophy would merely fall into the pool of particulars.

At this point one might have hoped that I would have said what I think a plausible aim for philosophy is. But given the nature of this investigation and the conclusions I have drawn, it is not yet clear to me what a plausible aim of philosophy might be—so I'm not comfortable making any rash suggestions. For now, all I can say is there is no universal aim of philosophy, and that it's possible for there to be multiple mutually exclusive aims in philosophy.

One might think that there is no universal aim of philosophy, but there are particular aims for particular philosophies. If this were true, we are still left with the question: ‘what unites all the particular philosophies if not a general aim?’ To this one might reply that there is a *universal method of philosophy*. And indeed, no adequate answer to the question, ‘what is philosophy?’ can be given without addressing the method of philosophy itself.

## **Chapter 2: On the Methods of Philosophy**

### **Section 1: Rejecting a Universal Method of Philosophy**

Last chapter we began our inquiry on meta-philosophy by focusing on the aim of philosophy. We found that there are many different conceptions of what philosophy aims at, and some philosophical aims conflict with others. We conclude that there is no universal aim of philosophy, and the discipline is not unified by any particular aim regardless of how general and basic that aim might be, since any aim can be disputed by philosophy itself. The problem that emerged from this, was the paradox of meta-philosophy—that given the multiplicity of conflicting aims, the discipline in general is not unified by a common goal or purpose. Here we begin our investigation on method.

It's not the aim of philosophy, or any particular subject matter that makes the discipline distinct, since its aims are the aims of inquiry in general, and its subject matter include all topics in general. Instead, we might suppose that the method of philosophy is what unifies philosophy. Or in other words, the way in which we go about doing philosophy, the way in which we think about things, or the methods of reasoning that we use, is what could account for the unity and distinction of the discipline. We might think, then, that there must be some universal method of philosophy. This would give us an answer to the paradox of meta-philosophy from the previous chapter. We might say, ‘philosophers aim to achieve many different things and the topics they inquire about are the broadest possible subject matter, thus philosophers come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, but what unifies them as *philosophers* is that they inquire in accordance with the universal method of philosophy.’ And what is the universal method of philosophy? An account has yet to be given, but we will investigate some historical candidates, namely Plato’s Socratic Method, Descartes’ methodological doubt, and Kant’s transcendental philosophy. But we find there is not a universal method of philosophy that could establish the unity of the discipline. There are many ways which philosophers go about doing philosophy, and every way is subject to philosophical dispute. Philosophical method is a philosophical topic, and that is the primary reason why a universal method could not establish the unity of the discipline.

## 2.11: The Socratic Method

The Socratic Method is thought to be one of if not the fundamental method of philosophy. Plato was credited as being the first to use a dialectical method, and for many of us this was our introduction to philosophy. So we will begin with him, and we will be brief since my only aim is to show that his method is not universal, that is, it is not a method conditional for philosophy.

Plato explains the method,

The common reproach against me is that I am always asking questions of other people but never express my own views about anything, because there is no wisdom in me; and that is true enough. ... But with those who associate with me it is different. At first some of them may give the impression of being ignorant and stupid; but as time goes on and our association continues, all whom God permits are seen to make progress...<sup>44</sup>

This passage should be considered to be an explanation of the *Socratic Method* which is characterized by a questioner who bears no wisdom—he does not express his own views, and a patient in labor; one who seeks knowledge and truth but has not yet achieved it. The patient attempts to answer the questions presented in an authentic way—a way in which genuinely seeks truth and understanding—and the questions should guide him to that destination.

The Socratic Method is a species of dialectical method; philosophy is a discipline that proceeds through conversation and discourse. If we attempt to formulate the Socratic Method in terms of a conditional method for philosophy the result is something like this: ‘all philosophers participate in a dialogue that is constituted by asking questions and attempting to answer them’. The aim of this procedure is truth, knowledge, and wisdom in a very broad sense. However, the Socratic Method fails to unify the discipline of philosophy. I will give two reasons for this: 1) counter examples can be given, 2) a philosopher could outright reject the Socratic Method as a proper method in the first place.

When we observe the discipline of philosophy and the practices that occur within it, it is clear that not all instances of philosophy are dialectical in a Socratic way. For example, the popular analytical methods in philosophy often takes the general form and style, ‘so and so said

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<sup>44</sup> Plato. *Theaetetus*. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992. 12.

this, but they are wrong about it because such and such.' This method is still dialectical in a broad sense because someone said something and someone said something in response. Still, it is not in any significant way *Socratic* because the Socratic Method is characterized by a question which is initially asked without any claim to knowledge. By comparison, the crude analytic method need not ask any dialectical questions, but instead it merely asserts that the previous claims in question are fallacious and proceeds to demonstrate why.

One might suggest that the Socratic Method is general enough to encompass the analytical style I described. The general dialogue between two analytic philosophers might be motivated by a general philosophical question, for example, 'what is consciousness?' The various theories which are presented and argued for would represent the Socratic patients who attempt to answer the original Socratic questions. Yet the critic may not be motivated by the general philosophical question that motivated the theorist at all. He might say, 'I don't care about what consciousness is, I only wish to point out that what you said was false for these reasons.' An explanation of how this response is still in some sense *Socratic*, would be contrived. Philosophers don't always aim to guide you to the truth, sometimes they just want to prove to you that you're wrong. One need not look far in philosophy to find more counter examples.

Secondly, a philosopher could outright reject the Socratic Method as a proper method in the first place. One might argue that Socrates merely manipulates his opponent with questions that leads them to the conclusion he desires. Drawing on the insights of Chapter 1, there is a difficulty in distinguishing between the philosopher and the sophist, and if so, it is also difficult to tell whether or not Socrates is a philosopher or a sophist. Thus, one might argue that he is a sophist. I will not attempt to espouse that kind of criticism here, but merely suggest that it is possible. The fact that the Socratic Method is subject to philosophical debate and controversy and that the distinction between philosophy and sophistry is obscure is evidence that philosophers could simply reject the method outright.

Arguably, many contemporary philosophers today do not emulate the Socratic Method in the slightest. And if it's possible for philosophers to reject the Socratic Method, it could not be a unifying aim for the discipline unless we simply exclude those philosophers from the discipline; however, that would violate the philosopher's prerogative to question any assumption including the methods by which we do philosophy in the first place. The fact that philosophers can reject

the Socratic Method, or any method, is a consequence of the fact that we can philosophize about our methods of philosophy.

## 2.12: Methodological Doubt

Descartes's meditations are another classic introductory piece of epistemological, metaphysical, and psychological topics in modern philosophy. Thus, Descartes's methodological doubt is worth mentioning for the influence it has had historically. Even so, an examination of Descartes's method would be inadequate for our task in understanding the discipline of philosophy in general, since the method is contested within philosophy. And if we weaken the method to make it less controversial, it also fails to distinguish the discipline and therefore could not be a universal method of philosophy.

Descartes's methodological doubt is a method of philosophical inquiry that begins in a state of uncertainty, and from that state it seeks certainty through systematic reasoning and justification for the construction of an edifice of certain beliefs;

I will suppose then, that everything I see is spurious. I will believe that my memory tells me lies, and that none of the things that it reports ever happened. I have no senses. Body, shape, extension, movement and place are chimeras. So what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain.<sup>45</sup>

The state of uncertainty is often interpreted as the beginning of philosophical inquiry, since in order for any other philosophical inquiry to proceed, we must first establish certainty for our most basic beliefs. Descartes was shocked by the many opinions he had held early in life that turned out to be false, which led him to begin an inquiry that could establish the certainty of all his beliefs. He believed that without a proper foundation he could not be certain that his current opinions were true. The foundation of all knowledge in general for Descartes is the cogito, and he proceeds on the basis of reason, qualifying a belief to be certain when he has a clear and distinct idea. The method is analogous to Euclidean geometry because both disciplines construct an edifice resting on self-evident principles. These indubitable beliefs would supply the

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<sup>45</sup> Descartes, Rene. "Meditations on First Philosophy." *The Elements of Philosophy*. Ed. Cahn, S. Siegel and S. Gendler, T. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 354.

justification by which we rest all our beliefs in general, in such a way that, for any given belief, we could trace its justification by way of inference to more basic and certain beliefs.

Descartes's method is not universal and cannot characterize the method of philosophy in general because it is contested within philosophy itself. Foundationalism, a view in epistemology founded on Cartesian methodological doubt, is contested by coherentists. Coherentism is an epistemological view that explains knowledge not in terms of justified beliefs reducible to a few foundational beliefs, but as a network of beliefs that are certain only insofar as they make sense given all our other beliefs. If some beliefs conflict with others we would thereby lose certainty, and consequently, knowledge as well. For the coherentist, there is no need to doubt the existence of an external world, as crude Cartesian foundationalists might, because coherentism does not endorse Cartesian methodology. Descartes's methodological doubt could not be a universal method of philosophy because it's not true that all philosophers use it.

The obvious question for methodological doubt is: 'which beliefs are we supposed to doubt?' If we were crude Cartesians we might say: 'well, all of them'. But this is too strong to be a candidate for the universal method of philosophy because philosophers generally do not doubt all beliefs. Instead of interpreting Descartes literally, might we weaken the method in the hopes of salvaging something that could be said of *all* philosophers?

We might weaken the method and say that all philosophers doubt in order to discover what is true. Although not all philosophers doubt the same beliefs, nevertheless, they doubt some beliefs and seek to discover the truth of the matter. But we have weakened the method too much, since it fails the criterion of distinction. In ordinary life when we hear an accusation, we often give the person the benefit of the doubt in order to let more evidence emerge that could confirm the accusation. We give people the benefit of the doubt to prevent us from forming false opinions. This is an example of doubting in order to discover the truth, but it is not philosophical.

The method by which Descartes determines certainty of a belief is by way of inference to more basic foundational beliefs. But one might suggest that all philosophers practice the method of doubting those opinions which they are uncertain of. They might say: 'well, who cares about Descartes's method of determining certainty—it's an inescapable route to radical skepticism—let's just suppose that all philosophers doubt beliefs which they do not have adequate certainty about. What's wrong with that?' The problem is that many people doubt beliefs which they do

not have adequate certainty about. You might have the belief that a sports team will win the championship, but you may also doubt the truth of that belief when money is on the line. A philosopher might believe his hands exist, but when arguing with the Cartesian skeptic, he may also doubt the truth of that belief. The method of doubting those beliefs which are uncertain fails to distinguish philosophical ways of thinking from other ways. Certainly there is a distinction between doubting who will win the championship and doubting whether or not the external world exists. The supposition that all philosophers doubt beliefs which they do not have adequate certainty about is not only true for philosophers in general, but it's true for most people in general, and therefore it fails to distinguish the discipline in a relevant way.

It is also false that all philosophers doubt beliefs about which they are not certain, since, after all, philosophers are often very dogmatic. Philosophers often seem to find a way to be certain about something while forgetting it is a *philosophical* thesis after all. There does seem to be some sense in which philosophers question fundamental beliefs more often than ordinary folk, but it's also true that philosophers seem to be much more dogmatic than ordinary folk. When a philosopher has decided that some philosophical thesis is horribly mistaken, he will often get so bent out of shape about it that he can barely tolerate anyone who believes the thesis.

If a method is going to be a candidate for the universal method of philosophy, two conditions would be expected to be satisfied. One, that the method is not controversial, and two, that it adequately distinguishes the discipline. Cartesian methodology has failed to satisfy both those conditions. Methodological doubt is not a universal method because if we interpret it according to the way Descartes used it, it's controversial, and if we interpret it more generally, it fails to satisfy the criterion of distinction.

### **2.13: Transcendental Philosophy**

Kant's transcendental question is: 'what are the conditions for the possibility of experience?' The Kantian project is to determine the limitations of human knowledge so we might know what we are capable of understanding, and what lies beyond our limits. What motivates such a project is that philosophers for centuries have disagreed and argued about the most general and obscure topics without any consolidation. If philosophy aims at knowledge, then perhaps we ought to begin by establishing what we can in fact know, and what we cannot. This project is called transcendental philosophy as it is meant to establish the limits of

philosophical inquiry in general, and it might be supposed that it ought to be done first before any natural philosophy can make progress. The reason why philosophers have argued throughout the ages without consolidation is because we have not yet determined the limits of reason.

Some philosophical topics according to Kant are impossible to know by means of reason alone,

These unavoidable problems of pure reason itself are God, freedom and immortality. But the science whose final aim in all its preparations is directed properly only to the solution of these problems is called metaphysics...<sup>46</sup>

Transcendental philosophy was supposed to show that the topics of metaphysics could not be known *a priori*. However, the reason why Kant's programme collapsed and failed to establish a universal foundation for reason was because transcendental philosophy itself was a metaphysical topic.

Kant writes, "... certain cognitions even abandon the field of all possible experiences, and seem to expand the domain of our judgments beyond all bounds of experience through concepts to which no corresponding object at all can be given in experience."<sup>47</sup> Here we see one general idea that underpins the transcendental philosophy; not all our cognition is empirical. The mind is capable of conceiving an idea that in principle cannot be given in experience. Such ideas are the objects of transcendental philosophy; they are concepts given by pure reason itself. Kant illustrates the *a priori*, "The light dove, in free flight cutting through the air the resistance of which it feels, could get the idea that it could do even better in airless space."<sup>48</sup> The idea that a dove could glide better in airless space is not something that can be verified empirically; nevertheless, there is something about it that seems intuitively true. In the empty space of pure understanding, the limitations of empirical knowledge do not hinder the concepts of reason, since empirical knowledge would suggest that a dove could not survive let alone fly in airless space, yet reason does not take this to be refutation of the ideal. Transcendental philosophy is immune to empirical objections and can only be inhibited by self-contradiction.<sup>49</sup>

The specific definition of transcendental philosophy in the words of Kant is this:

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<sup>46</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 139.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 128.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 128.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 129.

I call all cognition transcendental that is occupied not as much with objects but rather with our *a priori* concepts of objects in general. A system of such concepts would be called transcendental philosophy.<sup>50</sup>

One could interpret transcendental philosophy as providing the ultimate foundation of all scientific knowledge as a candidate for the most fundamental branch of philosophy from which we would establish the limitations of all philosophy and scientific knowledge in general. As Kant says, “Philosophy needs a science that determines the possibility, the principles, and the domain of all cognitions *a priori*.<sup>51</sup> I will make one objection to the idea of transcendental philosophy. Kant admits that “... transcendental philosophy is a philosophy of pure, merely speculative reason.”<sup>52</sup> If transcendental philosophy is *merely speculative*, should we not add it among the problems of pure reason and call them, God, freedom, immortality, and transcendental philosophy? Perhaps it is impossible for us to answer this question: ‘how is it possible for us to do transcendental philosophy?’ If transcendental philosophy lies beyond the limits of reason, then this would severely undermine Kant’s project to determine the foundation of knowledge.

Consider the question: ‘is transcendental philosophy an inquiry that exists within the domain of ordinary philosophical inquiry, or does it exist outside that ordinary domain?’ One might suggest that transcendental philosophy lies outside the domain of ordinary philosophical inquiry, but this is implausible. Kant regards transcendental philosophy as a *science* that determines the possibility of all cognitions, so it must also determine the possibility of its own transcendental cognitions. Transcendental philosophy demonstrates the self-reflexive and recursive nature of philosophy more generally; that philosophy is a discipline of inquiry that is capable of questioning and determining its own methods and limitations. *The Critique of Pure Reason* is a meta-philosophical inquiry that seeks to discover the conditions for the possibility of cognition and experience; hence, it is Reason’s examination of its own faculties. Once we realize the self-reflexive nature of the critique, it is obvious that the project extends beyond the limitations that it sets for itself. When one attempts to ‘peel back’ the layers of inquiry, reasoning, and thinking in general, one can only discover more inquiry, reasoning, and thinking. In effect, we cannot escape reasoning when performing a critique of reason, and we cannot

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 133.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 139.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 135.

escape thinking when thinking about thinking. Transcendental philosophy and meta-philosophy are still done within *philosophy*.

Collingwood opens his book on philosophical methodology by indicating that Kant's programme to establish the most fundamental methodological limitations of reason failed:

if methodology is a part of philosophy, Kant's programme collapses; for we can no longer hope to settle the methodological problems once for all then go on with the substantive philosophy, because any advance in that will react upon and reopen the problems of methodology.<sup>53</sup>

*The Critique of Pure Reason* and transcendental philosophy was supposed to establish the foundational method of philosophy upon which all substantive philosophy would proceed. But since the method of philosophy is a philosophical topic we might question the validity of the methodological account, in Kant's case, transcendental philosophy, which would collapse the Kantian programme. Insofar as transcendental philosophy is philosophically problematic it could not establish the foundation of philosophical inquiry upon which the future of philosophy would rest.

One should wonder if transcendental philosophy is also a metaphysical topic because it lies beyond the limits of reason, i.e., reason is not capable of determining its own limits. However, this worry did not seem to concern Kant. For instance, according to Korner, we must "... distinguish between the *a priori* science containing the principles for the application of *a priori* concepts [logic] and the Transcendental Logic which shows the possibility of that science."<sup>54</sup> The latter project, Transcendental Logic—which sets out to show that some non-mathematical concepts are *a priori*—"... will turn out to be the *a priori* part of the natural sciences or rather of Newtonian physics."<sup>55</sup> We know that Kant was so impressed with Newton's work that he thought the nature of the physical world was finally discovered. Kant thought he was doing the same for philosophy. Newtonian mechanics, as it turned out, is not the most fundamental description of physical reality. It's also clear that transcendental philosophy did not develop into a branch of natural sciences in the way Kant had imagined it would, nor did it succeed in establishing a foundational method of philosophy because we can reject the very

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<sup>53</sup> Collingwood. *An Essay on Philosophical Method*. Great Britain: Oxford University Press, 1933. 21.

<sup>54</sup> Korner, S. *Kant*. Bristol, Great Britain: Western Printing Services Ltd, 1955. 45.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 45.

possibility of transcendental philosophy in the first place. Transcendental philosophy is not *transcendental* in some substantial foundational sense, but instead it's just ordinary speculative philosophy.

I have no intention to take any credit away from Kant for his work is still immensely important, but the fate of transcendental philosophy has turned out to be much like the traditional metaphysical topics. Philosophers are still doomed to clash in a never-ending struggle to uncover some hidden truth of Kantian philosophy. Do noumena exist? What are the conditions for the possibility of transcendental philosophy? It seems as though there are still plenty of questions whose answers lie beyond the limits of reason, and they are not limited to God, freedom, and immortality of the soul. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was one of the most extravagant failed attempts to establish the foundation for knowledge.

## 2.14: Thought Experiments

The contemporary discussion regarding philosophical methodology is as problematic as its history. It's not the case that after over two thousand years of inquiry, philosophy has finally agreed on some proper methodology. Although the methods have changed, and arguably gotten better in some ways, there is still as much controversy now as there ever was. If we survey the contemporary literature regarding the use of thought experiments and intuitions in philosophy, we find that there is no generally accepted theory governing these topics—they are controversial just like any other topic in philosophy. This supports the thesis that philosophy does not have a universal method.

In the following discussion there are two questions going on in the background. First, is there a universal method of philosophy? And secondly, are the methods of philosophy any good? My goal is to establish that there is no universal method of philosophy, and the way I go about it is by critically examining some candidate methods, namely, thought experiments and intuitions. So the discussion focuses on the second question in many areas, but the ultimate goal is not to argue for some particular method over others; instead, by showing the disagreement over the limitations of our methods, I will have shown that there is not a universal method. Philosophers disagree about what the methods of philosophy are capable of; they disagree about which methods ought to be used and how we ought to use them, and some even deny that certain methods are used at all in the first place. The controversy could not be any more radical.

I think it's safe to say that almost all philosophy uses the method of thought experiments. The broader method of philosophy is thought to be argumentation, but thought experiments are often used by philosophers in making arguments. Some areas of philosophy seem to have fewer thought experiments in the literature, for example, aesthetics. Examples in philosophy can be given where thought experiments are not used; nevertheless, it cannot be denied that thought experiments are ubiquitous in philosophy, and are at the very center of philosophy's self-conception. For this reason, skepticism about thought experiments is very unsettling for most philosophers (or it should be very unsettling). Skepticism about thought experiments forces us to ask meta-philosophical questions, for example: what are the limits of thought experiments? What can we expect to accomplish with thought experiments? Are they reliable? We will examine the views of James Robert Brown in his book, *The Laboratory of the Mind*, and Timothy Williamson in, *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. Both Brown and Williamson have positive views on thought experiments. There is not any general agreement on the proper account of thought experiments, and their use, limits, and reliability have not yet been adequately determined.

A thought experiment is some sort of mental exercise that uses the imagination and reasoning capacity to bring us to some conclusion or insight. Now that's a vague definition; it does not distinguish philosophy from, say, literature in general, but it gets us started. Perhaps the best way to grasp what a thought experiment is would be to review some examples. Luckily, Brown gives us lots plus a useful taxonomy. Brown is a Platonist about thought experiments, which is an unusual yet interesting view. The most striking aspect of Platonism about thought experiments is this: thought experiments give us knowledge about the world, not in space and time, not merely in our minds or imagination, but out in the world of abstract universals. The word 'world' here, I take it, is not a metaphorical use in the way someone might say 'welcome to my world', but in a realist sense implying that abstract universals exist in the world 'out there', and we perceive them too!

As mentioned in Brown's book, Kathleen Wilkes argues for a different thesis. She says that thought experiments in physics are totally valid, but philosophical thought experiments are not. The primary reason that philosophical thought experiments are different is because they often take us too far from reality to be valid ways of coming to know something about the world. I think there is probably something to be said about that, but there are examples of less

extravagant thought experiments in philosophy, and there does not seem to be any reason why the more mundane thought experiments in philosophy are not the same as the ones used in physics.

Brown divides thought experiments into two general kinds: *destructive* and *constructive*. Constructive thought experiments are further divided into three types, namely: *direct*, *conjectural*, and *mediative*.<sup>56</sup>

Here's what he says about destructive thought experiments,

... a destructive thought experiment is an argument directed against a theory. It is a picturesque *reductio ad absurdum*; it destroys or at least presents serious problems for a theory, usually by pointing out a shortcoming in its general framework.<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps one of the most famous destructive thought experiments in philosophy are the Gettier cases. These thought experiments attacked a widely accepted philosophical thesis, that justified true belief is sufficient for knowledge.

Galileo's refutation of Aristotle's theory that heavier bodies fall faster than light ones is also a destructive thought experiment. Given Aristotle's theory that heavier objects fall faster than lighter ones, we are asked to imagine that a light ball is tied to a heavy ball and dropped from a high location. Galileo reasons that the light ball will slow up the heavy one so the speed of the combined system will be slower than the speed of the heavy ball falling alone. On the other hand, the combined system will be heavier than the heavy ball alone, and so it should fall faster. But it is absurd for the combined system to both fall faster and slower, therefore Aristotle's theory must be false.<sup>58</sup>

Here we see a clear *reductio ad absurdum*. The thought experiment takes Aristotle's theory as the premise for the argument, then sets up a scenario in which a contradiction follows. Aristotle's theory is therefore destroyed. This is Brown's favourite thought experiment and he thinks it's a platonic one. We'll come back to it and examine it in more detail after we finish the rest of his taxonomy.

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<sup>56</sup> Brown, James. *The Laboratory of the Mind*. London: Routledge, 1991. 34.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 1-2.

A *mediative* thought experiment, “is one which facilitates a conclusion drawn from a specific, well-articulated theory.”<sup>59</sup> This can be done in a number of creative ways, but the goal of the thought experiment is to make some aspect of a theory which at first seems unintuitive seem more plausible. For example, Phil Dwyer gives some mediative thought experiments to make his view that objects can be multiple colours in the same space and time seem more plausible. He invites us to observe a mirror from one position and observe that it is brown, then change our position and observe that the very same patch on the mirror has changed colour. These thought experiments are mediative because they aim to make some counter-intuitive aspect of a theory more plausible.

*Conjectural* thought experiments are ones where we, “establish some (thought-experimental) phenomenon; we then hypothesize a theory to explain that phenomenon.”<sup>60</sup> For example, Philippa Foot’s trolley problem<sup>61</sup> is a conjectural thought experiment. We are asked to imagine a hypothetical situation where we are faced with a decision to let five people die or pull a lever that will kill only one person. This thought experiment is conjectural because it does not begin with an articulated theory, instead it merely presents a problematic situation which we theorize a solution for. Conjectural thought experiments stimulate new theories.

A *direct* thought experiment resembles mediative thought experiments which, “start with unproblematic (thought-experimental) phenomena, rather than conjectured phenomena.”<sup>62</sup> And, “like conjectural ones, [they] do not *start* from a given well-articulated theory – they *end* with one.”<sup>63</sup> Direct thought experiments are different from mediative thought experiments because they establish new theories rather than merely providing supporting justification for an already well-articulated theory.<sup>64</sup> Direct thought experiments are different from conjectural thought experiments because they begin with unproblematic phenomena. For example, the conjectural thought experiment I suggested was the trolley case which presents a dilemma that we need to

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 36.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 40.

<sup>61</sup> Foot, Philippa. “The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect”. *Oxford Review* 5 (1967): 5-15.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 41.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 41.

<sup>64</sup> Brown indicates that the difference between mediative and direct thought experiments might be a matter of degree.

solve. Direct thought experiments do not begin with a problematic scenario, i.e. one which we think needs an explanation.

The teleological argument for the existence of God is a direct thought experiment. We are asked to observe the universe and notice that it is of great complexity. We might replace complexity with other impressive characteristics of our liking, for example, the universe is ordered, functional, beautiful, etc. By analogy we observe the same features in a watch. We would never think that a watch could have come into existence merely by coincidence, and so we make the same inference for the universe—it's too complex and beautiful for it to have come into existence by coincidence, so it must have been created by a designer. This thought experiment does not depend on any well-articulated theory; it merely makes observations about the world, and it establishes a new theory that God created the world.

The example Brown gives is Galileo's free fall thought experiment. We already saw this experiment as an example for destructive thought experiments, but as it turns out, Brown thinks it's also a direct thought experiment. Galileo's free fall thought experiment is a direct thought experiment because it establishes a new theory—that bodies fall at the same speed. By eliminating the alternative intuition that heavier bodies fall faster, Galileo has also made a positive case for the thesis that bodies fall at the same speed. This is what Brown calls a *platonic* thought experiment, "... [platonic] thought experiments fall into two categories; they are simultaneously destructive and constructive (direct)."<sup>65</sup> Let's examine Galileo's thought experiment in more detail.

### **The Platonic Thought Experiment**

According to Brown, Platonism consists of four ingredients,

- (I) Mathematical objects exist independently of us, just as do physical objects.
- (II) Mathematical objects are abstract; they exist outside space and time.
- (III) We learn about mathematical objects as a result of the mind's ability to somehow grasp (at least some of) them.
- (IV) Though it is *a priori* (i.e., independent of the physical senses), the mathematical learning process is not infallible.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 43.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 54-55.

These four ingredients are of course about mathematical Platonism. Brown's strategy is to show the plausibility of mathematical Platonism to hopefully diffuse some worries about Platonism about thought experiments before he even begins talking about Platonic thought experiments. If that's so, then we ought to be able to interpret the four ingredients in terms of thought experiments, so we might try replacing the terms 'mathematical objects' with the objects of thought experiments. But what are the objects of thought experiments? The objects of thought experiments are abstract universals. Inspired by Gödel's belief that we could perceive mathematical objects, Brown argues that we can also perceive universals in the same way.

Brown thinks that Galileo's free fall thought experiment is remarkable because there was no new empirical data involved, and his new theory is not logically deduced from old data.<sup>67</sup> But I think Brown is more impressed with Galileo's free fall thought experiment than he should be. I would like to bring up two points I have about the thought experiment that are somewhat deflationary. The first worry I have is that the new theory which Galileo's thought experiment creates is not actually justified by the thought experiment itself. The second point is related to the first: the validation of Galileo's new theory is in fact justified empirically.

It was clear to me that Galileo's thought experiment had effectively destroyed Aristotle's theory that heavier bodies fall faster than lighter ones. A *reductio ad absurdum* is a very compelling argument. But then I asked, why does it follow from a rejection of Aristotle's theory, that bodies fall at the same speed? It seems to me that the new theory is merely presented as a new alternative, and its plausibility is increased solely by the fact that Aristotle is mistaken. But there is nothing about the thought experiment itself that shows that bodies fall at the same speed; it only shows that heavy bodies cannot fall faster than lighter bodies. With a bit of imagination, there could be alternative theories. For example, instead of supposing that it must be the case that bodies fall at the same speed, one might instead imagine that bodies accelerate at the same speed. But heavier bodies have a higher terminal velocity, which means they will eventually fall faster than lighter bodies. So it turns out that both Aristotle and Galileo are right in some sense and wrong in some sense. There is an equivocation between acceleration and velocity. We could interpret Aristotle as saying: 'heavier bodies have a higher terminal velocity than lighter ones',

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 77-78.

and Galileo as saying: ‘all bodies accelerate at the same rate’, in which case they’d both be right. But they aren’t saying that, so they are both wrong.

What’s more interesting is that we can ‘redo’ the thought experiment with this new information. Suppose now that we tied a heavier ball to a lighter ball and dropped them from a high location. At first, both balls would fall at the same rate. Then the lighter ball would reach its terminal velocity, say, 10 kilometers per hour. Now suppose that the terminal velocity of the heavier ball is 20 kilometers per hour. At the point where the lighter ball reaches 10 kilometers per hour, the heavier ball will continue to accelerate attempting to reach its terminal velocity of 20 kilometers per hour. We could now imagine that the heavier ball will pull on the lighter one speeding it up. We could also imagine that the lighter ball will pull on the heavier one and slow it down. Now we could make the same conclusion Galileo originally made; the total system will both speed up and slow down, which is a contradiction—but that would be a mistake. To be completely honest, I am not sure what the system will do. Maybe both balls will eventually reach the heavier ball’s terminal velocity; maybe the system will be slightly slower. Maybe the system will spin like a propeller or oscillate like a sound wave—I don’t know. But I do know that science proceeds by experiment in the real world.

What’s worrisome is to think as Brown does that after considering Galileo’s thought experiment, bodies definitely must fall at the same speed. As Galileo’s Salviati says, ““Without experiment, I am sure that the effect will happen as I tell you, because it must happen that way.””<sup>68</sup> Brown thinks this attitude is completely justified, but I don’t think so. Galileo’s thought experiment is valid because people can drop different objects of different weights and observe that they hit the ground at the same time. The fact that Galileo’s thought experiment has been empirically replicated validates it. And even then that is misleading because the story is not that simple, since with enough difference in mass and time to fall, heavier bodies will hit the ground first. Getting in the habit of believing the conclusions of thought experiments because you believe you are perceiving abstract universals ‘out there’ in the world is an epistemically dangerous habit. What makes scientific thought experiments so wonderful and interesting is that after the theory has been tested and verified, and the community has come to an agreement, it seems almost mystical that the original insight foresaw the truth of the theory prior to any

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 3.

empirical studies were conducted. Let's not forget all the scientific thought experiments that were falsified and eventually forgotten about.

All of the thought experiments Brown gives as examples are famous ones from physics. His task in his book was to investigate the nature of thought experiments in science, so unfortunately there was not much discussion about philosophical thought experiments. Since Brown focuses solely on the successful thought experiments of physics, I believe that he is overly dazzled by them due to their scientific success and renown. Successful scientific thought experiments present theories which are then validated by actual scientific experiment. Philosophical thought experiments do not enjoy this same sort of treatment, since the theories they propound are often not empirically verifiable, nor is empirical verification always relevant, and philosophical thought experiments generally lack the power to motivate the philosophical community to agree on some particular theory. Philosophical thought experiments usually remain controversial and debated.

Although I believe that scientific thought experiments and philosophical thought experiments are different in degree, not kind, I am primarily interested in philosophical thought experiments. Scientific thought experiments are often thought to be the more successful of the two, but I think this has to do with the success of science in general, not because scientific thought experiments have some unique characteristic that philosophical ones lack.

### **The Reliability of Thought Experiments**

The relevant questions I wish to ask at this point are: 'Are thought experiments reliable? Do they give us knowledge about the world?' Brown address a similar question: 'if thought experiments often end up giving us false conclusions, how then can you say that the thought experimenter sees the laws of nature?' Brown addresses the problem in a page. He says,

Frankly, I have no idea how to answer this question, which is one of the most important in all philosophy of science. It is not a problem which is peculiar to my view – it is really the problem of verisimilitude which has been the bane of philosophy of science for years.<sup>69</sup>

I guess his reply is that concerns about whether thought experiments give us true theories about the world is a problem more broadly for theories in general, and the complaint does not attack

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 92.

Brown directly. I don't feel the need to press Brown on that point, but what I'm interested in is how reliable thought experiments are and that is a perfectly valid question. The thought experiments presented by Brown might push us towards the *yes* side, since they have contributed to science. But as I've already said, what makes scientific thought experiments successful is the empirical validation that they enjoy. If we stripped scientific thought experiments of all the real empirical scientific work that followed after them, scientific thought experiments would probably be in the same boat as philosophical ones. If not for empirical experiment, we'd probably still be arguing with Galileo and Aristotle over whether or not bodies fall faster than others.

I think if we isolate constructive thought experiments from empirical verification entirely they will end up being unreliable and lack the power to motivate consensus. For example, Galileo's free fall thought experiment was a direct thought experiment, but it gave us a false theory. Dwyer's mediative thought experiments might have made his theory seem more intuitive for some, but for others it would be entirely unpersuasive. Conjectural thought experiments are easily denied because they begin with a problematic scenario; they motivate inquiry and speculation. Destructive thought experiments might enjoy more reliability and power to motivate consensus because they take the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. This reinforces the observation that negative theses are often more successful than positive ones. Positive theses are more speculative and usually make inferences weak enough for people to deny without too much trouble. For constructive thought experiments that do not enjoy empirical verification, one ought to wonder just how reliable they are. A good starting place to examine the reliability of philosophical thought experiments would be to first offer an example of a successful *direct* thought experiment in philosophy that could be the paradigm of success. This would establish the mere possibility that some direct thought experiments can reliably give us knowledge about the world. But that's no easy task. The history of philosophy is filled with ambitious constructive theories which are almost always rejected by a large portion of philosophers.

So how is the reliability concern a problem for Brown's Platonism about thought experiments? Well, the way I see it, scientific thought experiments are not wonderful because they allow us to see the laws of nature *a priori* as abstract universals, but merely because they have been verified by scientific experiment. Without empirical verification, constructive

scientific thought experiments could not hold the status that they do; they would just be the usual humdrum philosophical thought experiments that philosophers would endlessly argue about.

Once science verifies a *philosophical* thought experiment it then wears the medals and badges of science, and we thereafter call it a *scientific* thought experiment. Scientists verify their theories with empirical experimentation and evidence. Philosophers, however, offer the thought experiment itself as the *evidence* for their theories. We often hear philosophers saying: ‘Philosophy gives evidence for its theories too. It gives arguments and thought experiments which act as evidence.’ But try saying that to a real scientist and he’ll probably think you are insane for thinking that a thought experiment counts as real evidence for a theory.

Brown unfortunately does not investigate philosophical thought experiments, instead he investigates scientific thought experiments, so we’ll have to part ways. But if scientific thought experiments are not different in kind from philosophical ones, then his taxonomy is still useful for our purposes. My worries about thought experiments are focused on the reliability of constructive thought experiments that do not enjoy empirical verification. We might suppose that *scientific* thought experiments are reliable in some sense because they have helped contribute to scientific knowledge, and consequently they possess some sort of prestige as a result of that contribution. Scientific thought experiments only seem reliable because they have been supplemented by scientific verification. Strip away empirical scientific verification and communal agreement, and you will have a philosophical thought experiment.<sup>70</sup>

It might be uncontroversial that most philosophy uses thought experiments. Indeed, if we removed thought experiments from philosophy, there may not be much left of philosophy at all. But what’s clear, is that there is not a universally agreed account of thought experiments and their limitations. As we saw, Wilkes denies that thought experiments in philosophy can produce authentic knowledge of the world, whereas Brown holds that they can. On my own view, there is lots to worry about with Brown’s Platonism. It’s possible for someone to be a full blown skeptic about philosophical thought experiments, and insofar as that person is a philosopher, it follows that thought experiments are not a universal method of philosophy.

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<sup>70</sup> One might suggest that Schrodinger’s Cat thought experiment has different interpretations by the scientific community. It’s not really empirically verifiable whether or not the cat is alive or dead or in-between, and scientists also disagree about what state the cat would be in. In this case, I want to say scientists are doing a bit of philosophy of science.

## The Gettier Cases

Some recent studies have shown that many people from East Asia do not possess the Gettier intuition.<sup>71</sup> This sheds doubt on the reliability of our thought experiments. But Williamson is optimistic. He argues that philosophical thought experiments utilize the same ordinary counterfactual reasoning that are used in science and other disciplines of inquiry. Philosophy is not exceptional in that regard. He uses the Gettier cases as the paradigmatic examples of successful philosophical thought experiments. However, more work would be needed to generalize to all kinds of thought experiments, perhaps most notably, constructive thought experiments. Philosophical thought experiments are not used solely to destroy theories, they are also used to justify new theories. But Williamson focuses only on the Gettier-type thought experiments. If Gettier cases are paradigmatic even though there is reason to doubt the Gettier intuition, then we can assume that worries about thought experiments apply much more broadly. Nevertheless, if we want to defend philosophical thought experiments from the skeptics, we've got to start somewhere. Gettier cases look like a good place to start.

One of Williamson's primary targets are, "philosophy-hating philosophers (a common breed) [who] claim that philosophical thought experiments are profoundly unlike those in natural science, in ways which make the former bad and the latter good".<sup>72</sup> I don't think that philosophical thought experiments are profoundly unlike those in natural science. But I do think that the apparent difference between them has to do with the empirical verification that scientific thought experiments ultimately enjoy. The difference between scientific and philosophical thought experiments is this—scientific thought experiments present theories which real scientific experiment usually verifies, philosophical thought experiments often *are* the evidence which philosophers use to justify a theory. The reason for this difference is that philosophical theories are often not empirically verifiable, so we make do with a priori methods.<sup>73</sup> So although philosophical thought experiments are not profoundly unlike thought experiments in science, I do think there are some significant differences regarding the *use* of thought experiments. Williamson however does not focus on these differences. He simply wants to make the case that

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<sup>71</sup> See Weinberg, Stich, and Nichols. "Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions." *Philosophical Topics*: Vol. 29, nos. 1 and 2, 2001.

<sup>72</sup> Williamson, Timothy. *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007. 179.

<sup>73</sup> For example we cannot know a true definition by empirically verifying it, however empirical observation is often the guide by which we formulate our definitions.

philosophical thought experiments employ ordinary counterfactual reasoning. On his view there is nothing peculiar about the method of philosophy.

Williamson suggests that the Gettier thought experiments are paradigmatic in philosophy. He says, “if any thought experiments can succeed in philosophy, his do”.<sup>74</sup> If it’s true that Gettier cases are successful, then that would be sufficient proof that some philosophical thought experiments can be successful. His strategy is to subsume the epistemology of thought experiments under the epistemology of counterfactual conditionals and metaphysical modality. Ultimately, the view is that Gettier cases are an application of ordinary ways of thinking, not as something peculiarly philosophical.<sup>75</sup>

The primary motivation for Williamson’s analysis and defense of Gettier cases is due to some concern over the reliability of our intuitions which thought experiments rely on. As Weinberg et al. note some psychological studies have suggested that different cultures might have different ways of reasoning. In particular, “Westerners also have a stronger sense of agency and independence, while East Asians have a much stronger commitment to social harmony.”<sup>76</sup> What was also found, was that there is a striking difference between Westerners and East Asians over the Gettier intuition. Just over 70 percent of Westerners had the intuition that the subject in the Gettier case only believes the proposition and does not know it, while under 50 percent of East Asians had that intuition. This gives rise to some skepticism over our intuitions. The skeptical challenge is: ‘why do we think our intuitions/judgments<sup>77</sup> are more reliable than theirs?’ Williamson dismisses this concern. He comments, “Much of the evidence for cross-cultural variation in judgments on thought experiments concerns verdicts by people without philosophical training.”<sup>78</sup> However this response might be premature. Williamson points out that these studies are done mostly on people without philosophical training, but he probably means *Western* philosophical training. It would be interesting to see the study performed on various

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 179-80

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 180.

<sup>76</sup> Weinberg, Stich, and Nichols. “Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions.” *Philosophical Topics*: Vol. 29, nos. 1 and 2, 2001. 436.

<sup>77</sup> Perhaps there is need for an important distinction to be made. Weinberg, Stich, and Nichols attack *intuitions* which epistemologists are often caught relying on. Williamson however has made a point to refrain from ‘intuition-talk’. Where one might expect mention of intuition, he uses the word ‘judgment’ instead. I think part of this has to do with the fact that it’s not clear what intuitions are. We might be able to replace ‘intuition’ with any of these words, ‘opinion, belief, judgment, intellectual seeming, etc.’

<sup>78</sup> Williamson, Timothy. *The Philosophy of Philosophy.*” Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007. 191.

academics from East Asian countries. For example, what sort of intuitions would experts on Eastern philosophy have? If they do not have the ‘right’ intuition, it would be unsatisfactory to say, ‘well they don’t have the right philosophical training’. Because again, what makes Western philosophical training better than Eastern?

Here’s my interpretation of what Williamson thinks is the best underlying argument for the Gettier case thought experiment. The thesis being attacked is the familiar JTB account of knowledge that, “[1]: necessarily, for any subject x and proposition p, x knows p if and only if x has a justified true believe in p.”<sup>79</sup> The Gettier argument as Williamson expresses it, is as follows:

(2) It is possible that there exists someone who stands in a Gettier relation to a proposition.

(3\*) If there were an instance of the Gettier case, it would be an instance of justified true belief without knowledge.<sup>80</sup>

(4) It is possible that someone possesses justified true belief in a proposition and does not know that proposition.

The argument is pretty straightforward. (2) is justified by the Gettier thought experiment; it establishes the possibility that someone could be in a Gettier case. (3\*) is the Gettier intuition formulated as a counterfactual. When imagining the thought experiment, it is obvious to us that the person does not know the proposition because he forms the belief based on facts that are irrelevant to the proposition, i.e., he is right because of luck. (4) is the conclusion which contradicts the JTB account. Typically, the response is to reject the JTB account as sufficient for knowledge.

There are two ways one might go when faced with the argument. If one possesses the Gettier intuition (3\*), then the JTB account must be wrong. But evidently, due to some surveys, not everyone possesses the Gettier intuition, i.e., some people do not believe (3\*). Who knows why, maybe they did not understand the thought experiment, maybe they did not have the relevant philosophical training, maybe they have a different way of reasoning due to cultural differences. Indeed, it seems as though the Gettier argument relies heavily on the Gettier

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 183.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 186.

intuition since (3\*) looks like it simply assumes the point that the Gettier thought experiment is trying to illustrate, i.e., that a case of justified true belief that is not knowledge is possible. And obviously, one would not accede to (3\*) if the Gettier thought experiment did not evoke the right intuition. For example, if you don't think the subject in the Gettier case is justified, you wouldn't think it's a counter example to JTB.

What reason do we have to dismiss the intuitions of a majority of people that are different from our own? It's easy to say that many people have poor judgment, but the Gettier intuition is not the only example. Many thought experiments in philosophy seem to rely on more controversial intuitions.<sup>81</sup> If there is doubt about the Gettier intuition, and it's the paradigmatic example of a philosophical thought experiment, we can assume there are greater doubts more broadly.

So what does Williamson say about this? As far as I can tell, he thinks that people who do not possess the Gettier intuition can be explained by humanistic incapacities that are inessential to the truth of the argument. As we saw, he thinks the studies that undermine the Gettier intuition are unpersuasive because the subjects are not trained in philosophy. We might try and chalk it up to language barriers, but competent English speaking people can fail to have the Gettier intuition too. But even worse, some professional epistemologists deny the intuition such as Weinberg, Stich, and Nichols. To that he responds, "The residual levels of disagreement in judgments between trained philosophers do not warrant wholesale skepticism about the method of thought experiments."<sup>82</sup> But I'm not entirely convinced that Gettier cases are genuine counter examples to JTB. For example, the proposition which Smith has justified true belief is supposed to be: 'the man who gets the job has ten coins in his pocket.' But 'the man' equivocates Smith and Jones. Smith believes that *Jones* will get the job; he does not believe that *Smith* will get the job. The original proposition can be divided into two specific interpretations: one where Smith gets the job and one where Jones gets the job. Smith believes the false interpretation and does not believe the true one. Maybe I'm missing something, but it seems plausible that Gettier

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<sup>81</sup> For example, Judith Thompson's violinist thought experiment. Is it irrational for someone to say that it seems intuitive for the violinist to stay plugged in?

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 191.

cases are not genuine counter examples because the subject in each case is not justified in believing the proposition for one reason or another.

In conclusion, Williamson's view is that philosophical thought experiments can be subsumed under ordinary counterfactual reasoning, specifically, "a thought experiment such as Gettier's embodies a straightforward valid modal argument for a modal conclusion. The role of the imagination is in verifying the premises."<sup>83</sup> On Williamson's view, philosophical thought experiments employ the same kinds of reasoning used in the sciences and ordinary life—philosophical thought experiments are not exceptional. But we should not forget that philosophical thought experiments are attempting to justify much bolder and interesting claims than the counterfactuals of everyday life. It makes sense that we'd have higher standards for our philosophical counterfactuals since we are trying to get more mileage out of them. Thought experiments seem to rely heavily on intuitions which might be good enough for getting to the grocery store, but for the purposes of philosophy a deeper investigation is warranted.

Another broader concern is that Williamson has only defended the success of negative theses in philosophy. Can the insight be carried over to constructive philosophical thought experiments as well? If destructive thought experiments can be successful, should we infer that constructive ones can be as well? I think the answer to that is *no*. We know that negative theses are easier to defend than positive ones. Considering the doubts that exist over the Gettier intuition, it should be obvious that there are greater doubts that exist over thought experiments more generally. It's difficult enough to justify the reliability of the Gettier thought experiments let alone thought experiments in general. After all, the success of Gettier thought experiments are something of an anomaly caused by the apparent wonder of a simple refutation of an ancient theory. It hit the scene at the right time, right place, and the right way. Despite all its splendor and attention, the Gettier cases have not really accomplished much at all, only that philosophers have been wrong about knowledge all this time—big surprise. To suppose that Gettier cases are the paradigm of successful philosophical thought experiments is really not saying that much about the success of philosophy in general.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 187.

## Conclusion

This discussion on thought experiments is far from conclusive or exhaustive. The question of reliability for philosophical thought experiments has yet to be given a straightforward answer. Nevertheless, what we've seen is that there are numerous ways of thinking about thought experiments. The Platonic route leads to a priori knowledge of the laws of nature. Williamson's view, call it the 'ordinary route', leads us to think that philosophical thought experiments are no different than thought experiments in science and in ordinary life. If there is no reason to be skeptical about scientific thought experiments, there's no reason to be skeptical about philosophical ones either. Whatever one's view happens to be about thought experiments, it's certainly the case that there is not any widespread agreement regarding the reliability and limitations of thought experiments. The primary reason for this is that philosophical methodology is itself a philosophical topic, i.e., we can philosophize about our methods in philosophy.

Intuitions seem to play an important role for the justification of a thought experiment. Brown's Platonism about thought experiments was inspired by Gödel's Platonism about mathematical objects. Mathematical intuition is analogous to sense perception for the mathematician. Empirically, we observe objects with our eyes, the mathematician observes abstract objects with his intuition. If mathematicians are allowed to perceive abstract objects, why can't we do that in philosophy to? Williamson is more hesitant to brandish the use of intuitions. As he comments,

"Intuition" plays a major role in contemporary analytic philosophy's self-understanding. Yet there is no agreed or even popular account of how intuition works, no accepted explanation... Since analytic philosophy prides itself on rigor, this blank space in its foundations looks like a methodological scandal.<sup>84</sup>

In the next section I'd like to investigate some views on intuition. It seems to me that our stance on intuitions is important for understanding how reliable thought experiments actually are. If philosophical thought experiments rely on intuitions, then we ought to get clear on what intuitions are and their limitations. What we'll find, unsurprisingly, is that there is a methodological controversy over intuitions in philosophy.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 215.

## 2.15: Intuitions

*Our ‘intuitions’ are simply opinions; our philosophical theories are the same. Some are commonsensical, some are sophisticated; some are particular, some general; some are more firmly held, some less. But they are all opinions...<sup>85</sup>*

*Of course some philosophers think that something’s having intuitive content is very inconclusive evidence in favor of it. I think it is very heavy evidence in favor of anything, myself. I really don’t know, in a way, what more conclusive evidence one can have about anything, ultimately speaking.<sup>86</sup>*

For some philosophers, intuitions are probably the worst form of evidence you could give to justify a philosophical argument. When someone says, ‘it’s my opinion’, we often feel a sense of relief, since it’s just an opinion and we need not go to war. For others, intuitions have an ultimate justificatory status. When we finally get to the bottom of things in philosophy, we’re left standing naked with our intuitions as if all our reasons in philosophy are reducible to them. There might not be a better example of methodological controversy in philosophy. I’ll investigate three primary views on intuitions; I call them *pessimistic* (Cummins), *optimistic* (Bealer and Sosa), and *deflationary* (Cappelen). In order to adequately answer our concerns and worries about the methods of philosophy, we ought to be able to account for our intuitions. What are they? How reliable are they? What are their limitations? What are their uses? I don’t expect to decisively answer these questions, but they are the most important motivating questions for the discussion.

I will explain and discuss each taxonomy, then offer an explanation why I think methodological controversy in philosophy is not reconcilable. All great philosophical problems stick around. Perhaps that’s what makes them so great; if we solved them, soon enough there wouldn’t be anything left to philosophy.

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<sup>85</sup> David Lewis. *Philosophical Papers: Volume I*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

<sup>86</sup> Kripke, Saul. *Naming and Necessity*. Harvard University Press, 1980. 42.

## The Pessimistic View

The pessimistic view is any view that supposes that intuitions don't count as good evidence in philosophy. One way of thinking about intuition is this: intuition is to philosophy as observation is to science.<sup>87</sup> However, where observation is non-controversially essential to scientific research, the uses of intuition in philosophy are controversial. Cummins argues explicitly that intuitions are epistemically useless in philosophy.

In science, when two observations are made but conflict with each other, there are two ways we can go. Either we reject one of the observations as evidence, or they are both dismissed. Observations in science are admissible as evidence only if they are intersubjective.<sup>88</sup> Intersubjectivity requires that everyone can make the same observation and get the same results. In contrast, intuitions are not intersubjective because anyone can have an intuition and they are often not the same intuitions as others. Suppose two observations conflict. It follows that both observations cannot be evidence until the other is discounted. As Cummins asserts, "We cannot, in this instance, agree to disagree, because we cannot maintain the objectivity of science while tolerating a fundamental subjectivity in the observational evidence."<sup>89</sup> But philosophers often agree to disagree and still think that their intuitions are evidence for their views. Intuitions fail the intersubjectivity test.

Philosophical intuitions are not calibrated. When our observations are mistaken they are explained away either by errors or artifacts. Errors are caused by inaccuracies in our equipment or by our own sloppiness. Artifacts are observations that carry information about the instrument we are using to observe a target. For example, the apparent curvature of peripheral objects caused by reading glasses.<sup>90</sup> Unlike observational techniques, Cummins says nobody ever attempts to calibrate philosophical intuition. We can't calibrate them because any time that it is possible for us to do so we would have no

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<sup>87</sup> Cummins, Robert. "Reflection on Reflective Equilibrium." *Rethinking Intuition*. Ed. DePaul, Michael and Ramsey, William. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998. 115.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 115.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 115.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 117.

use for the intuitions. For example, if we were to calibrate ‘fairness intuitions’ here’s how we might go about it. We want to know if a subject’s intuitions about fairness are accurate, so we create a list of cases, each case being fair or not fair. The subject will then take the test and indicate whether each case is fair or not. We would also need a key that could tell us all the right answers of the test. The problem is, where do we get the key? We could make the test out of cases that are non-controversial: ones that everyone already agrees upon. But what use is there for intuitions in a context in which everyone already agrees on what is fair and not fair? So philosophical intuitions are never calibrated. Any time that it is possible for us to calibrate them is in a context where our theory is so well established that it’s ready to go do some work in another department.<sup>91</sup>

Where do our intuitions come from? Cummins thinks, “Every remotely plausible story about the origin of philosophical intuitions, then, lead us to the view that they are generated by explicit or tacit theories of the target properties.”<sup>92</sup> When intuitions are generated due to a tacit theory, they are only as good as the tacit theories which generated them. Unfortunately, there isn’t good reason for us to think tacit theories are reliable. Some might want to replace God with evolution to explain our ‘innate’ theories. However, theories given by evolution are adaptive, but not necessarily true.<sup>93</sup> Cummins says institutions like science and philosophy exist so we can overcome our natural endowments. There is no good reason to think our intuitions are reliable. Consequently, he concludes that philosophical intuitions should be regarded as epistemologically useless.

Cummins gives us three compelling reasons why intuitions are epistemically useless: 1) they fail intersubjectivity, 2) they are not calibrated, and 3) they come from unreliable tacit theories. Perhaps one of the reasons philosophers think that intuitions are epistemically useful is because they are often commonly shared. When we appeal to intuitions we think, ‘everyone has got to agree with this intuition, it’s just that obvious.’ But there is no principled reason why everyone should agree to our intuitions; it’s just either they have them or they don’t. Cummins has given reason to think that the appeal to

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 118.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. 121.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. 122.

agreement is not a useful method of calibration. In any context where there is widespread agreement on our intuitions, we've got a theory so well-established that the intuitions are not doing the real epistemic work. For example, everyone has the intuition that if they jump off a roof they'll get hurt. That's because the theory of gravity is tacitly engrained in us, not because the intuition is our justification. The intuition exists only because the theory is engrained so deeply in us.

### The Optimistic View

Optimism about intuitions is any view that thinks intuitions play an appropriate evidential role in philosophical inquiry. Appealing to intuitions is a form of justificatory reductionism. The way I like to think of it is, if we follow the chain of justifications, we'll eventually reach rock bottom beliefs that cannot be justified any further. Descartes thought the cogito was at the very bottom, but we might go further still and say we have intuitions a layer beneath. We might have asked, 'what justifies the belief that the cogito is true?' Someone might say, 'I have a strong intuition that I exist.' The fact that an evil demon could not deceive me is a good reason, but even *that* is justified by rational intuition. Part of being rational, perhaps, is possessing rational intuitions that lie beneath all our most basic and fundamental beliefs. For instance, if the law of non-contradiction simply was not intuitive, or for some reason it could not be fathomed logically and it did not appear in any way to be true, we'd be in big trouble. Our reasoning would be entirely different, and probably the arguments that are expounded from that intuitive starting point would be irrational to us. After all, everything follows from a true contradiction. If *that* were intuitive, I guess anything would be rational. And that's counter-intuitive, therefore, we need our intuitions at least for something. This certainly sounds like it begs the question. But doesn't begging the question also reduce to rational intuitions? We're off to the races.

George Bealer thinks intuitions are relevant to logic, mathematics, and philosophy. For him, intuitions are not some mysterious power, but merely, "... when you have an intuition that A, it *seems* to you that A."<sup>94</sup> Here, *seems* is a genuine

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<sup>94</sup> Bealer, George. "Intuition and the Autonomy of Philosophy." *Rethinking Intuition*. Ed. DePaul, Michael and Ramsey, William. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998. 207.

conscious episode. He suggests that intuition must be understood as ‘rational intuition’, which is distinguished from other sorts of intuitions, for example, physical intuition—we have the physical intuition that the world works in some way. Intuition must also be distinguished from belief since a belief is not a seeming but an intuition is. We can also believe things that are not intuitive to us, and we can have intuitions that we do not believe.

Bealer brings up an interesting idea. He says that beliefs are plastic but intuitions aren’t. For example, we can change our beliefs for whatever reason, intuitions, however, are much more difficult to change. He challenges us to try and diminish our intuition that a Gettier case could occur. But I think intuitions are very plastic. I have, in stranger states of mind, stared at my hands and experienced a *seeming* that my hands were not there despite the fact I was looking at them. I have also thought that the subject in a Gettier case is not really a counter-example to the JTB account. I’ve had all sorts of intuitions in philosophy. Given the diversity of views that exist in philosophy, in learning and understanding them, I’ve consequently felt the intuitive plausibility of radical philosophical beliefs. Bealer doesn’t think that intuitions are as plastic as beliefs, but I think for some intuitions they are perhaps even more plastic than beliefs. For example, I cannot say with a straight face that I don’t believe my hands exist. Nevertheless, I can say that in the right skeptical state of mind, it seems intuitive to me that my hands do not exist. Bealer says the axioms of naïve set theory are intuitive despite the fact we know they are false. But I think our knowledge that they are false diminishes the intuitiveness of the theory. I can’t help but add that that’s what seems intuitive to me.

What’s Bealer’s definition of a rational intuition? Here’s what he says,

when we have a rational intuition—say, that if P then not not P—it presents itself as necessary: it does not seem to us that things could be otherwise; it must be that if P then not not P.<sup>95</sup>

So rational intuitions are intellectual *seemings* that present themselves as necessary. What does it mean for a *seeming* to present itself as necessary? Interestingly, Bealer admits he does not know how to explain that. He speculates, “necessarily, if x intuits that P, it

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 207.

seems to  $x$  that  $P$  and also that necessarily  $P$ .<sup>96</sup> However, he does not wish to take a stance on that. Probably for good reason, since the glaring concern is: if a rational intuition is a *seeming* but part of it is that it's also necessary, is the necessity also part of the *seeming*? And if so, why isn't it the case that a rational intuition is merely an intuition just like any other except that it also *seems* necessary? If that's all a rational intuition is, then one might have doubts that it could play the ultimate justificatory role that we want, namely, to justify fundamental logical, mathematic, and philosophical beliefs. If at the end of the day, our evidence amounts to rational intuitions, which is equivalent to saying: 'it *seems* necessary to me', then our opponents might merely say: 'it doesn't *seem* necessary to me'. If we have a rational intuition that the naïve comprehension axiom is true, but we know that it's false, then what does that say about our rational intuitions? Well, obviously they are not infallible, and they aren't necessarily necessary either. Something can seem necessary to us, but that of course does not imply that it actually is necessary.

Sosa also holds an optimistic view on intuitions. Here's his definition,

At [time]  $t$ , it is intuitive to  $S$  that  $p$  iff (a) if at  $t$   $S$  were merely to understand fully enough the proposition that  $p$  (absent relevant perception, introspection, and reasoning), then  $S$  would believe that  $p$ ; (b) at  $t$ ,  $S$  does understand the proposition that  $p$ ; and (c) the proposition that  $p$  is abstract.<sup>97</sup>

This definition excludes perception, introspection, and reasoning in order to isolate the conscious episode from other modes of belief formation to avoid reducing them to other modes. Sosa's definition of intuition can be described as a belief in an abstract proposition that is not formed by perception, introspection, or reasoning, but merely by understanding the proposition. Some examples of intuitive beliefs according to Sosa are:  $2+2=4$  and no sphere is a cube. Other examples might be: the closest distance between two points is a line, a triangle is a three sided figure, and etc. One of the key features of the types of propositions that Sosa is aiming at is that they are uncontroversial and can be known merely by reflecting on them.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 207.

<sup>97</sup> Sosa, Ernest. "Minimal Intuition." *Rethinking Intuition*. Ed. DePaul, Michael and Ramsey, William. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1998. 259.

One might doubt the reliability of rational intuitions due to recent studies in psychological literature. Sosa thinks these doubts are premature. He argues that perception and introspection are both liable to be mistaken from time to time; they do not guarantee epistemically justified, true belief. Nevertheless, he is prepared to admit that “our reasoning *competence* seems flawed; not just our performance.”<sup>98</sup> But he does not think this seriously undermines our use of intuitions, however. Human perception is systematically misleading in poor conditions, but we do not discredit perception wholesale. Why shouldn’t we have the same attitude towards intuition?

Skeptics are concerned that our intuitions are unreliable. But Sosa argues that the shortcomings of intuition are the same as those of perception and introspection. Drawing on the insights of Cummins, perception is the primary mode of observation, and it satisfies intersubjectivity. We know perception is reliable because we can all observe the same thing and get the same results. When we do not have the same results, closer investigation is usually easy. For example, if we dispute whether an animal is a dog or a cat, we can get a closer look. The vast majority of perceptual disputes are consolidated in this way. Sosa has isolated the notion of intuitions to what appears to be analytic propositions exclusively. But even there, if we have a dispute over intuitions about an analytic proposition, there does not seem to be any obvious way to go about reconciling that disagreement—it’s not as simple as getting a closer look. Perceptual observations can be calibrated: that’s what optometrists are for. But there is no corresponding scientific expert designated to calibrate our intuitions.

Rational intuitions for Bealer and Sosa seem to be a restricted class of analytic cases. The examples in that domain are largely non-controversial, however, one worry is that the restricted class of rational intuitions does not accurately represent the actual usages of intuitions by philosophers. Intuitions have been used substantially in ethics, but are the intuitions excited in us by ethical thought experiments also rational intuitions? For example, consider Judith Thompson’s famous violinist thought experiment.<sup>99</sup> It seems intuitive that upon being involuntarily tied up to the violinist, we are not morally obliged

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 261.

<sup>99</sup> Thompson, Judith. “A Defense of Abortion.” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1:1 (Autumn 1971): 47–66.

to remain there. If we employ Bealer's definition of a rational intuition, we should ask: does it seem necessary that we are not morally obliged in this case? Well, it only seems necessary in the sense that if I were dehydrated, it's necessary for me to drink some water. It does not seem necessary in the sense that  $1+1=2$ . If we use Sosa's definition, upon understanding the proposition: 'if you were tied to a terminally ill violinist, you are not obligated to stay', one need not *believe* the proposition, and therefore it would not be a rational intuition according to Sosa. Yet the proposition might still seem intuitive to you, nonetheless.<sup>100</sup>

Rational intuitions might have a role in justifying fundamental logical and mathematical propositions. However, the range by which intuitions are applicable in philosophy is uncertain. According to Sosa and Bealer, the range is very limited, but we often observe philosophers appealing to intuitions beyond the defined scope. The most pertinent question is: in what contexts and scenarios are we justified in thinking our intuitions are reliable? More investigation is needed to answer this question.

### The Deflationary View

A deflationary view is one that denies that philosophers rely on intuitions as evidence in philosophy. This view differs from the pessimistic view because pessimists begin by supposing that philosophers rely on intuitions but argue we shouldn't, whereas deflationists deny that philosophers rely on intuitions in the first place. Consequently, the pertinent question of whether or not intuitions are reliable is bunk. The question, along with any enterprise which aims to answer it, is pointless. Herman Cappelen argues for this view in his book *Philosophy without Intuitions*.

One might have thought that intuitions could be a candidate universal method in philosophy. The discussion between the pessimists and optimists has focused on whether or not intuitions are good or bad. But despite ones opinion on that point, it could still be

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<sup>100</sup> More examples of intuitions in philosophy that are excluded from Bealer and Sosa's definitions could be given, which I would enjoy going over, but brevity limits me. I'll just give another example worth thinking about here. Paul Churchland famously argued for the eliminativist view that folk psychology is a radically mistaken theory, and we ought to get rid of it and replace it. Folk psychology is perhaps one of the most intuitive implicit theories we have; after all, we'd have such a hard time fitting in socially without it. Philosophers often have no shame in denying our most engrained intuitions.

true that all philosophers use intuitions, and the potential consequence being: all philosophical methodology is bad. But optimism and pessimism aren't the only contenders on the topic; the deflationary view denies that philosophers use intuitions in the first place. The controversy is not merely about whether or not philosophical methodology is good or bad, but it's also about what the method of philosophy *actually is*. This is a much more fundamental kind of controversy.

Cappelen's main goal is to argue for a rejection of the thesis of Centrality that "Contemporary analytic philosophers rely on intuition as evidence (or as a source of evidence) for philosophical theories"<sup>101</sup> He says there are two arguments for Centrality that are tacitly assumed: *The Argument from 'Intuition'-Talk* and *The Argument from Philosophical Practice*. The former argument is an inference caused by the apparent use of the word 'intuitive' and cognate terms. A brief survey of contemporary journals in analytic philosophy would show many examples of philosophers characterizing key premises in their arguments as intuitive.<sup>102</sup> This implies that philosophers are using intuitions as evidence. The latter implicit argument for Centrality is this: intuitive judgments have a set of features or properties, and we observe that philosophers rely on judgments that have those properties. Therefore, philosophers rely on intuitions as evidence for their theories. Bealer and Sosa are examples of philosophers who define 'rational' intuitions and assume that philosophers rely on those intuitions. Cappelen argues that both these strategies fail to justify Centrality.

Cappelen investigates the way we use the word 'intuitive' in the English language and shows that it's typically not used to signify evidence. For example, we might say: 'this operating system is intuitive.' However, this usage is not a thesis about evidence nor a source of evidence. 'Intuitive' is also often used as a hedging term. For example, in response to a question, one might answer: 'intuitively, such and such is the best way to go about it.' Here the meaning of 'intuitively' could be replaced with other hedging terms, like: 'it seems to me that', or 'in my opinion', or 'probably'. Given the uses of the word

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<sup>101</sup>Cappelen, Herman. *Philosophy without Intuitions*. Great Clarendon Street, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 3.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid. 4.

in English, there is no mental state picked out, nor does the word pick out an evidential source.<sup>103</sup>

For many proponents of Centrality, like Bealer, intuition is not merely a hedging term, but it is a conscious episode or mental state. The usual meaning of the word ‘intuition’ used by philosophers differs from ordinary language in this regard. Proponents of Centrality would most likely define a different meaning for ‘intuition’ that is significantly different from colloquial usage. Nevertheless, Cappelen thinks that much of the actual uses of the word found in philosophical literature turns out to be colloquial usage, since most philosophers who get in the habit of ‘intuition’-talk have not actually philosophized about what they mean by what they are saying.

Cappelen’s second major argument against Centrality is aimed at the more sophisticated defender of Centrality, rather than those who unreflectively get in the habit of ‘intuition’-talk. He examines some popular philosophical literature and investigates whether the arguments used rely on intuitions in some way. He gives three features which are commonly thought to be typical of a reliance on intuitions. The features are: “F1: Seems True, F2: Rock Status, F3: Based Solely on Conceptual Competence.”<sup>104</sup> Throughout the case studies, we observe that none of these features are found in the arguments presented. Let’s have a look at one of them.

Goldman’s familiar barn façade thought experiment is often thought to be an example of philosophy’s reliance on intuitions. Briefly, the thought experiment goes like this. Suppose you are driving in the countryside and you are looking at a barn; so you form a justified belief that there is a barn and suppose it’s true that it is a barn. So far so good for knowledge. But now suppose that there are barn facades scattered all over the countryside, and as it turns out, the fact that you are looking at a real barn is merely a coincidence. You actually have a much greater probability to be observing a barn façade. Now upon recognizing that the original justified, true belief has a large component of luck involved, one thinks *intuitively* that they do not know in this case. Goldman does not use the word ‘intuition’, but he says that we “would be strongly inclined to withdraw the

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 47.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. 130.

claim that [we know] the object is a barn".<sup>105</sup> The challenge of Goldman's paper is to explain the change in our assessment.

The relevant candidate intuition that the thought experiment relies on can be loosely formulated as: 'In the modified scenario, Henry doesn't know.'<sup>106</sup> According to Cappelen, there is no evidence or reason to believe that Goldman's thought experiment and arguments rely on any of the three features given at the start of the chapter. The candidate intuition that Henry doesn't know is not formulated in terms of *seeming true*—a mental episode—by Goldman. He merely indicates that we would be strongly inclined to deny that Henry knows the object is a barn. Nor is there reason to believe that Goldman is relying on intuitions that assume some kind of 'rock' justificatory status. Lastly, Goldman shows no indication that we assent to the proposition: 'in the modified scenario, Henry doesn't know', solely by conceptual competence. We know by experience that facades are deceptive, and that's why we are inclined to say that Henry would not know it was a barn. There is no rational intuition or *episode* that justifies our inclination to believe Henry does not know.

Cappelen has argued for a strong deflationary view that philosophers do not rely on intuitions as evidence in philosophy. The most philosophers have done is engage in some irresponsible 'intuition' vocabulary. After all, it sounds much more sophisticated and persuasive to say: 'intuitively, one would think that such and such', as opposed to: 'it seems to me that such and such', or: 'in my opinion, such and such'. The use of intuitions seems to be successful in other disciplines like math, theoretical physics, and logic. What makes them so inappropriate to philosophy? In math and logic, intuitions are used to justify axioms. For the Platonist, intuitions are used to perceive abstract objects. In theoretical physics, intuitions guide new and speculative theories which are then verified or falsified by experimental physics. I think math and logic use intuitions successfully because the propositions that are said to be intuitive are generally undeniable.<sup>107</sup> Physics uses intuitions successfully because the experimental procedure eventually verifies those

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<sup>105</sup> Goldman, Alvin. "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge." *Journal of Philosophy* 73 (November):771-791 (1976). 773.

<sup>106</sup> Cappelen, Herman. *Philosophy without Intuitions*. Great Clarendon Street, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 172.

<sup>107</sup> By that I mean people don't usually quibble over basic mathematical and logical truths.

initial intuitions. But for much of philosophical discourse, the propositions which we want to say are intuitive are not undeniable, nor can they be verified or falsified empirically. A general philosophical motto might be, ‘leave no stone unturned’, and that includes intuitions.

## **2.16: No Universal Method of Philosophy**

I hope that we can agree to this without too much trouble; there is no universal method of philosophy. What we’ve seen historically, is that philosophers have developed different ways of doing philosophy, and we’ve only briefly and inadequately discussed some of those methods. A more detailed and sophisticated investigation of the history of philosophy would demonstrate in greater detail all the complexities of the various philosophical methods. What we’ve observed, are some of the methods of the western philosophical tradition. I imagine that if we surveyed philosophy outside of this tradition the methodological differences would be even more radical. So we should conclude that for philosophy in general, there can be no universal method.

Some very basic methods can be suggested that perhaps all philosophers do in fact perform. It would be impossible for me to respond to all the possible suggestions to that point, however, I can suggest that all methods that are used by *all* philosophers would fail to adequately distinguish the discipline. This is because, in some sense, the most general methods of philosophy are the same as the methods of inquiry in general (i.e. asking fundamental questions, speculating hypotheses, using reason and logic, and etc.).

No method of philosophy is capable of unifying the discipline under one general procedure because every method is philosophically contestable. I think there is an important sense in which philosophical methodology is ultimately foundationless. Of course, there is logic and there is reason, but even they can be brought into the crosshairs of philosophy. Even if it were uncontroversial that we all used logic and reason, it would still be an open philosophical question just what it means to use them.

The method of philosophy, throughout history, has in fact changed. Evidence of this are the various traditions and schools of thought in philosophy. As a modern philosopher, how does one cope with this fact? One should wonder, how does one do philosophy properly? Am I doing

it properly now? This, I think, is the fundamental problem of philosophical methodology: how do we determine what the proper method of philosophy is?

If philosophical method is the sort of thing that perpetually changes and never achieves an ultimate foundation upon which our inquiry could rest, then we can expect that the way we do philosophy now will not be the way philosophy is done in the future. More questions emerge—for example, are subsequent methods that come about better than the ones prior to them? If so, it would seem like we are getting better at doing philosophy as time goes on, but that view is controversial.

### **Conclusion**

A brief survey of the history of philosophical method indicates that there has not been any universal method of philosophy. Instead, the methods which philosophers use change over time and often change in fundamentally radical ways. We have surveyed some of the contemporary literature on the use of thought experiments and intuitions in philosophy, and we found radical methodological controversy. I conclude that there is no universal method of philosophy precisely because the methods of philosophy are themselves philosophical topics. There are many different conceptions of our methods in philosophy, many of which fundamentally conflict with one another. The primary example of this that I have presented is the controversy over intuitions. For some, they are the best possible justification, for others, they are epistemically useless, and for the deflationists, we are not relying on intuitions in the first place.

Once we accept the diversity of philosophical method, more questions become salient. For example, does philosophy make progress? This will be the focus of Section 2 of this chapter. For now I can only suggest that we keep an open mind about philosophical methodology. In Chapter 1 we found that there is no universal aim, and now we conclude that there is no universal method. What I'd like to do next is investigate progress in philosophy. There has been a recent tendency to think that philosophy is a scientific discipline, and I think that tendency is mistaken. I aim to show that philosophy does not make scientific progress, and I suggest that we ought to find alternative ways of thinking about progress in philosophy.

## **Section 2: Philosophical Progress**

### **2.21: Progress in Philosophy**

In the previous sections, we found that philosophy throughout history has sought a foundation for knowledge, but every attempt to determine the foundation has failed. Historically, the methods of philosophy changed in radical ways. We can now give up any attempt to discover a universal philosophical method or some way of proceeding in inquiry that might be the most fundamental starting point. After giving up that noble philosophical project, many meta-philosophically important questions become salient. What is our task in philosophy? What are the methods of philosophy, and which ones are the best ones? Has philosophy made progress despite its numerous historical failures? Can philosophy make progress? One of the ways philosophers react to the unfortunate history of philosophy is by aligning their meta-philosophical conceptions with the disciplines of science. They say philosophy really is an ordinary science just like mathematics. And philosophy makes progress like science too; it advances knowledge by producing true theories. I argue that philosophy is different from science in some very fundamental methodological ways, and consequently, philosophy cannot make scientific progress. There are other options for progress in philosophy, but let us first kill the sick cow before anyone else drinks from it.

#### **No Progress**

Eric Dietrich, a professor of philosophy at Binghamton University is a skeptic about philosophical progress. His answer to the question, ‘does philosophy make progress?’ is an emphatic *no*. He writes, “... philosophy is exactly the same now as it ever was; it has made no progress whatsoever.”<sup>108</sup> This sounds like a bold claim, but what’s even more surprising is what Dietrich thinks of any philosopher who denies it. He says, “Its denial is diagnosed as a form of *anosognosia*, a mental condition where the affected person denies there is any problem.”<sup>109</sup> What are his reasons for thinking that philosophy does not progress?

His first observation is made in his own department of philosophy. There are a number of philosophers working on ethics, each of which hold different philosophical ethical views. There

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<sup>108</sup> Dietrich, Eric. "There Is No Progress in Philosophy," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 12: Iss. 2, Article 9., 2011. 1.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. 1.

are deontologists, essentialists, virtue ethicists, and relativists. Each of these philosophical views in their most well-known formulations are incompatible with each other, and each brand of philosopher thinks he or she is right while everyone else is mistaken in some way.<sup>110</sup> We make similar observations in science. For example, just think of any time in science that a paradigm shift was occurring. However, mistaken theories are dropped in science and good theories are kept, thus science lurches forward. But according to Dietrich, Philosophy does not. He says, “Philosophy does not even stumble forward. Philosophy does not move forward at all.”<sup>111</sup>

Now we might be thinking, ‘surely easy examples can be given where philosophy has made progress. Consider the advancements made by the notions of possible worlds, supervenience, and modal logic.’<sup>112</sup> Dietrich responds with the questions: “If all these new notions represent advances, where’s the true philosophical theories? Where’s the deep and widespread agreement throughout the philosophical world about which theories are true?”<sup>113</sup> The simple reply to the first question is: ‘theory X’ is true. But Dietrich is unconvinced, he reminds us that X ranges over many theories which are incompatible. Dietrich does not pursue this line of discussion any farther. He merely asks, “How could the obvious truth that philosophy never progresses be so vociferously denied?” His explanation why philosophers keep denying that philosophy does not make progress is perhaps one of the most astonishing arguments (if you would even call it an argument) that I have seen a philosopher use.

According to Dietrich, the reason why philosophers deny that philosophy does not make progress is because they are suffering from a mental disability<sup>114</sup>

*Anosognosia* is a mental disability in which a person who suffers from another, primary disability denies that he or she does in fact suffer from the primary disability.

The primary disability that philosophers suffer from, according to Dietrich, is that they work in a discipline that makes no progress yet they get paid a salary for it, “This creates cognitive dissonance and is apparently impossible to live with.”<sup>115</sup> So philosophers develop *Anosognosia* and deny that philosophy never makes progress. Two more mental disabilities he mentions are

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 11.

the *Illusion of Explanatory Depth* (IOED), which, in a nutshell, means you think you know more than you actually do, and *Illusory Superiority* (IS), which again, in a nutshell, means we overestimate our positive qualities. The way that gets played out in philosophy is no matter what you believe, no matter how obvious or fundamental it happens to be, philosophers will argue that you are wrong about it.

### **Glass Half Full / Half Empty**

Chalmers, like Dietrich, recognizes that there has been a lack of progress in philosophy but he is not as pessimistic. According to Chalmers, we make some progress in philosophy, but it's a small amount. So instead of saying there is no progress in philosophy, he takes a weaker view and asks, ‘why isn’t there *more* progress in philosophy?’ Call this the ‘glass-half-full/glass-half-empty’ thesis: ‘there is some progress, but not as much as we’d like’.

Chalmers’ central thesis is, “There has not been large collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy.”<sup>116</sup> He takes large collective convergence to be the important criteria by which we would measure progress in philosophy. He compares the convergence in philosophy with the convergence observed in the hard sciences to show that philosophy does not achieve the same measure of progress as the hard sciences. The comparison is empirical so he conducts a survey that shows that philosophers generally disagree quite a bit about some of the bigger questions in philosophy.<sup>117</sup> No surprise there. Here is his argument,

- (1) Empirical premise: There has not been large collective convergence on the big questions of philosophy.
- (2) Bridging premise: If there has not been large collective convergence on the big questions of philosophy, there has not been large collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy.
- (3) Conclusion: There has not been large collective convergence to the truth on the big questions of philosophy.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Chalmers, David (2014) “Why Isn’t There More Progress in Philosophy?” *Philosophy*: Vol. 90: Iss. 01. 3.

<sup>117</sup> For your own interest, here are some of the findings that might be interesting. For A priori knowledge, 71 percent say yes, 18 percent say no, 11 percent say other. For abstract objects, 39 percent choose Platonism, 38 percent nominalism, 23 percent other. For logic, 52 percent choose classical, 15 percent choose non-classical, 24 percent choose other. Epistemic justification: externalism 43 percent, internalism 26 percent, 1 percent other. Most of the percentages add up to 100 percent, but for some like Epistemic justification and Logic don’t.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 4.

Usually when we give examples of progress made in philosophy they concern little questions in philosophy. Chalmers focuses on the big questions of philosophy to show that we have not achieved large collective convergence. Granting that, now the relevant question is, ‘why hasn’t philosophy made much progress?’

Philosophy does not make as much progress as the hard sciences because of premise deniability. When philosophers give arguments, their opponents can simply deny some premise or underlying assumption without too much trouble,

When we give arguments for our views, we are frustrated to find opponents biting the bullet by rejecting what we took to be a plausible premise, without this serving as any sign of defeat.<sup>119</sup>

Consequently, philosophical arguments usually do not lead to agreement, but to sophisticated disagreement. In contrast to science, scientific methods usually do lead to agreement. Sometimes it takes a while but it eventually gets there. Philosophical theories, at least the major ones, stick around for thousands of years and never enjoy widespread agreement.<sup>120</sup> Because of premise deniability there is almost always an escape route for philosophers, and this explains why they have failed to achieve large convergence on the truth for the big philosophical questions.

Traditional methods of philosophy have failed to achieve large convergence to the truth, but we might think that recent methodological developments have made progress in philosophy. For example, linguistic philosophy, phenomenology, feminist philosophy, cross-cultural philosophy, experimental philosophy.<sup>121</sup> According to Chalmers, each of these new methods have led to new insights and philosophical progress but philosophers have still failed to converge on the truth despite new methods. Premise deniability is the reason for many cases. Nevertheless, he thinks we can still hope that further methods will come about that will produce convergence on the big questions.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid. 14-5

<sup>120</sup> Platonism held the highest convergence percentage for abstract objects at 39 percent.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. 18.

## Subjective Progress

Unlike Chalmers and Dietrich, Moody avoids comparing progress in philosophy to progress in science.<sup>122</sup> Moody thinks it's obvious that if our notion of progress is limited to scientific progress we won't be able to make sense of progress in philosophy. So his task is to look for an understanding of progress that is appropriate for philosophy. He explains three conceptions of progress.

Progress 1: "... the kind of progress that is available when there is a specifiable, decidable goal."<sup>123</sup>

This is the most straightforward notion of progress and examples are easy to give; "The dieter makes, or fails to make, progress toward svelteness, the runner toward swiftness, the insurance salesman toward quota, and so on."<sup>123</sup>

Progress 2: "Progress 2 is the sort of progress that can be made even where the goal cannot be specified in any clear way, but given intervals of change *can* nevertheless be identified as progress or regress, by either the individual or some observer."<sup>124</sup>

For many cases of progress, progress 1 will not do because the goal of the activity is not specifiable or decidable. Examples of this type of progress are creative or artistic activities; "... the figure skater toward perfect form, the poet toward the perfection of her poem."<sup>125</sup> What's unique about these cases is that the figure skater or poet probably could not tell you what marks the attainment of the goal, but nevertheless, they have an intuitive sense whether or not they are making progress or regressing. One might think that a skater or a poet *could* specify a goal clearly. For example, the skater might say: 'I want to skate like my favourite skater'. Progress 2 does not seem different in kind from progress 1, since the relevant specific difference is clarity in specified goal, we can imagine a set of cases with gradually obscuring goals. Perhaps an extreme case of Progress 2 would be a painter who does not know what he is trying to do. When we ask him what he's doing he simply says: 'I have no idea, but I feel like it's coming along.'

Progress 3: "Progress 3 is a hybrid. It applies to the scientist, the gymnast, or the novice musician who is still trying to master the fundamentals of performance. It is characterized by the

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<sup>122</sup> Moody, Todd. "Progress in Philosophy." *American Philosophical Quarterly*: Vol. 23, Number 1, 1986. 35.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 35.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. 35.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. 35.

availability of a series of fairly decidable intermediate goals, but no goal of completion.”<sup>126</sup>

Progress 3 is a hybrid because it shares the characteristic of progress 2, that is, no goal of completion. But it is different from progress 2 because it has decidable intermediate goals; “Progress 3 is exemplified by the linking of episodes of progress 1 in the absence of an overall, or final goal.”<sup>127</sup> Thus progress 3 is chained together by a series of progress 1, yet the whole series itself does not have a clear goal. The mathematician, for example, may not care what the ultimate goal of math is, but he has a good idea of when he has or has not proved a theorem. The physical sciences are also progress 3 activities, since there may be no agreed ultimate aim for them, nevertheless, a series of solutions to problems will comprise progress in science.

Moody pairs progress 2 with creative activities and progress 3 with technical activities. I think it should be possible that some work in mathematics could be thought to be a creative activity, for example, a mathematician who develops a new system with original axioms. It should also be possible that some creative work could be a highly technical activity, for example, the painter who has loads of technical training which he uses, but is trying to paint something original that has never been seen before. It seems to me that all three conceptions of progress according to Moody are deeply intertwined and connected such that we cannot systematically divide all activities into only one category, since we can always imagine some exceptions.

Moody eliminates the possibility that the type of progress philosophy makes are progress 1 and progress 3; “Since we cannot adduce a record of solved philosophical problems, progress 1 and progress 3 must be ruled out.”<sup>128</sup> His argument for this is that philosophy is not a normal inquiry, to borrow Kuhn’s terminology, philosophy is not characterized by the presence of consensus-generating procedures. Moreover, “An important part of philosophical inquiry is agonism; one is expected to be called to task on any and all points. There are no safe places in philosophy.”<sup>129</sup> Consequently, the impetus for philosophical inquiry is not consensus but perpetual disagreement. As he suggests, “the only thing that philosophers are likely to agree about with enthusiasm is the abysmal *inadequacy* of a particular theory.”<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid. 36.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. 36.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. 37.

According to Moody, “it remains to be seen how actual disagreements in the present-day philosophical community are to be handled, since the “persistence of disagreement” is salient in all models examined.”<sup>131</sup> The fact that philosophers radically disagree about the various theories within philosophy makes understanding progress in philosophy difficult, since there is no obvious series of philosophical achievements. Certainly, some philosophical work is celebrated more than others and might be thought to be a great achievement, yet philosophical theories are not an achievement in the same sense that technical scientific theories are an achievement. The sense of philosophical achievement is something like: ‘it is incredible and amazing how someone could have come up with these ideas.’ The sense of a scientific achievement is more like this: ‘we now know that these elements exist and what they consist of.’ The philosophical sense of achievement is much like marveling at a work of art. The scientific sense is objective and rigid.

Moody’s final verdict is this,

Philosophy progresses by its inability to produce consensus in the short run, by its inherent instability, by subjecting every theory to “unfair” criticisms (criticisms derived from a different probative orientation), by preventing permanent dogmatism at the level of the individual philosopher, and at the cultural level.<sup>132</sup>

If philosophy progresses by its inability to produce consensus, where exactly is philosophy going? Philosophy, it would seem, is essentially destructive because it cannot unify our beliefs to consensus, but only divide our beliefs through disagreement. One might think that the goal of philosophy is merely to subject every theory to criticism and to prevent permanent dogmatism. Not only is this controversial, but it is disappointing and frustrating.

Moody gives us a bit more explanation, he says,

... progress 2 in philosophy... is paradigmatically undecidable progress, the sort where a final goal cannot be formulated, and where intermediate sub-goals are likewise without uniform criteria of success, but where the sense of development nevertheless importunes.<sup>133</sup>

The issue I’m having is that ‘paradigmatically undecidable progress’ seems contrary to a sense of development. If progress in philosophy is ultimately subjective, then it’s also plausible for us to think that philosophy has made a great deal of regress. So the last point that Moody makes, that

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid. 44.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. 45.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. 45

there is a sense of development in philosophy *nevertheless*, seems to be a moot point. The crucial aspect is whether or not philosophy is progressing or regressing, and without a clear goal to measure progress our answer remains obscure.

### Conceptual Progress

Hacker's views on philosophical progress are perhaps the most unique. On Hacker's view, philosophy is *not* a cognitive discipline, it is *not* a quest for knowledge, but instead, it is a quest for *understanding*. This has significant ramifications for how we understand progress in philosophy. Progress for Hacker does not come by acquiring new knowledge, but through *realization*. He specifies three types of progress in philosophy which he calls distinctive progress, analytic progress, and therapeutic progress. We will examine each of these in turn, but first we need to get clear on what Hacker means when he says that philosophy is not a cognitive discipline, nor a quest for knowledge.

If philosophy is a cognitive discipline, a participant in the quest for knowledge, then we would need to be able to characterize philosophical truths. What are the established truths of philosophy? Other cognitive disciplines, take mathematics, physics, and biology, for example, have distinct and clear subject matter. But for philosophy, "There *is* no general, agreed body of philosophical knowledge".<sup>134</sup> And, "if we examine the history of modern philosophy, it appears to be *a subject in search of a subject matter*."<sup>135</sup> Since the topics that philosophers talk about are so broad, it seems that the subject matter of philosophy is *all* subject matter. There is also a sense in which philosophy has *no* subject matter, since we are unable to distinguish a domain of topics that are properly philosophical. So we are unable to specify the established truths of philosophy, and we are unable to characterize what philosophical truths are.

As we have already seen, the history of philosophy shows that great philosophers recurrently, "attempted to isolate a distinctive subject matter for philosophy and a proper method for achieving the knowledge, which, they held, had evaded their predecessors."<sup>136</sup> Recall the projects of Descartes, Hume, Kant, and so on. What's characteristic of all these great programs is

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<sup>134</sup> Hacker, P.M.S. "Philosophy: A Contribution, not to Human Knowledge, but to Human Understanding." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*: Vol. 65, 2009. 2.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. 2.

they all collapsed for one reason or another. Hacker presents these historical failures as a reason to doubt that philosophy is a cognitive discipline. On his view, “the correct move is to challenge the fundamental assumption that is taken for granted by all participants in the debate, namely the assumption that philosophy is a cognitive discipline.”<sup>137</sup> Thus, the reason why philosophy has not been able to achieve the same success as the sciences is precisely because philosophy is not a cognitive discipline at all. If so, we might be wondering at this point: then what the hell is it?

Hacker writes, “Philosophy is not a contribution to human *knowledge*, but to human *understanding*. It is neither an empirical science nor an a priori one, since it is no science.”<sup>138</sup> What does it mean to contribute to human understanding and not human knowledge? One way to think of it is that “philosophy seeks not knowledge of new facts but an understanding of old facts”.<sup>139</sup> Philosophy, for example, clarifies conceptual features in the natural sciences and mathematics. Philosophy also categorizes and organizes concepts, and makes distinctions that clarify our understanding. In this way, philosophy seeks to understand ‘old facts’. These examples might be true, still, one might wonder how some distinctions do not contribute to human knowledge. Consider, for example, the distinction between pure and applied math or the distinction between deductive and inductive reasoning. How is it not the case that these distinctions, upon understanding them, do not constitute knowledge? One reason why the distinctions made in philosophy do not contribute to human knowledge might be because many of them are philosophically controversial. For example, think of the analytic/synthetic distinction and the a priori/a posteriori distinction. What we observe is that a great deal of philosophical work is not only drawing distinctions, but contesting them, erasing them, or redefining them. So the distinctions that philosophers draw would fail to give us *new knowledge*, since, generally, not all philosophers agree on the major philosophical distinctions. Nevertheless, those distinctions can give us new *understanding* (or misunderstanding). Ultimately, the task of philosophy is, “concept-elucidation for the purpose of resolving philosophical problems”<sup>140</sup>, and contrary to popular belief, philosophy is not a participant in the quest for human knowledge.

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid. 7

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. 7

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. 8

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. 14.

If philosophy is not a cognitive discipline, not a participant in the quest for knowledge, then does it make progress? As Hacker notes, progress is typically characteristic of the *sciences*. He comments,

But how can there be progress in a subject that has no subject matter in the manner of the sciences, and that adds nothing to human knowledge save for the realization of the ways in which various elements in our conceptual scheme hang together?<sup>141</sup>

If we understand progress in philosophy with the same model that we understand progress in science, our answer is *no*. The discoveries in science are *factual*, but philosophy

has no foundations. It erects no theoretical structures on the insights and conceptual clarifications it achieves. There is no instrumentation to aid observation and empirical discovery – but, of course, there is neither observation nor discovery.<sup>142</sup>

Thus, philosophy does not produce new facts that contribute to human knowledge. Scientific progress is measured by the accumulation of factual knowledge and the technological advancements that emerge as a result. According to Hacker, philosophy does not contribute to that scientific project, and therefore, philosophy does not make progress on the model of the sciences.

If we grant Hacker that philosophy does not make progress on the model of the sciences, then what sort of progress does philosophy make? The three examples of philosophical progress that Hacker gives are: discriminatory progress, analytic progress, and therapeutic progress.

*Discriminatory progress*: clearer distinctions are drawn between forms of reasoning, types of proposition, and kinds of concepts.

*Analytic progress*: there is progress in the characterization and clarification of problem generating concepts (*analytic progress*).

*Therapeutic progress*: there have been advances in dissolving certain kinds of conceptual confusion. (*therapeutic progress*).<sup>143</sup>

All three types of progress are progress of the understanding. Discriminatory progress clarifies notions that were once conflated. Analytic progress elucidates concepts for philosophical understanding. Therapeutic progress dissolves confusions and quandary. Each type of progress,

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. 25-26.

when achieved, comes in the form of *realization*. We realize that there is a distinction between a priori and a posteriori; we realize that the mind is a property, not a substance; and we realize that we need not seek an answer to the question, ‘what is the foundation of all knowledge?’, because there isn’t one.

If Hacker is right that philosophical progress is not to be understood on the scientific model, but instead, that progress in philosophy is measured by conceptual clarity and realization in the understanding, then an important consequence follows. Not only would there be progress in philosophy, but there could also be quite a large amount of regress. Unlike progress in the science that builds upon the knowledge of the past and continues to increase the list of accomplishments, philosophical progress ‘resets’ with each new generation.

### Scientific Progress

In the final chapter of *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, Williamson claims that philosophy has made progress. Indeed, he lists some examples, and he gives us some tips to help us make progress in the future. The central thesis underlying his views on philosophical progress is this: philosophical exceptionalism is false, philosophy is an ordinary scientific discipline. Dietrich, Chalmers, Moody, and Hacker all seem to subscribe to some sort of philosophical exceptionalism. Dietrich denies that philosophy makes progress at all; Chalmers seeks to explain why philosophy does not make nearly the same amount of progress as the sciences<sup>144</sup>; Moody and Hacker formulate new ways of thinking about philosophical progress. Williamson says that philosophy is a science and scientific progress has not only been accomplished in philosophy, but with the methods currently available, we can expect more progress in the future.

So what is philosophical exceptionalism? Williamson does not give us a definition of ‘philosophical exceptionalism’, and I can’t say I have actually heard someone say that they hold the view, still, there does seem to be a sense in which people do in fact think of philosophy as an exceptional discipline. Philosophical exceptionalism, I think, can be characterized by the following utterances: ‘philosophy is different in kind from the sciences’, ‘the methods of

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<sup>144</sup> I just want to flag that I am not entirely certain that Chalmers subscribes to philosophical exceptionalism. He is aware that disagreement in philosophy hinders progress, but he is optimistic that someday the big philosophical questions can be answered by philosophy.

philosophy are unique, other disciplines don't use the methods of philosophy', 'philosophical knowledge is a different kind of knowledge than the knowledge in other disciplines', 'philosophy is not comparable to the sciences', 'evidence in philosophy is different from the sciences', and etc.

Here is what Williamson says about philosophical exceptionalism, he says, "although there are real methodological differences between philosophy and the other sciences, as actually practiced, they are less deep than is often supposed."<sup>145</sup> He continues, "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."<sup>146</sup> For Williamson, philosophical exceptionalism primarily concerns philosophical methodology. If he could show that the methods of philosophy are ordinary, and thought experiments in philosophy use the same sort of reasoning as those used in science, then we would have less reason to think the methods of philosophy are exceptional.

Williamson argues against philosophical exceptionalism by illuminating the fact that philosophers are interested in answering questions about the *world* rather than some special restricted class of truths. For example, in Chapter 2 of *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, he argues that philosophy is not merely concerned about concepts—the linguistic and conceptual turns, he believes, were a mistake, since linguistic and conceptual truths are not the proper objects of philosophy. In Chapters 3 and 4 Williamson attacks the notion of analyticity. He argues that philosophy is not primarily concerned with analytic truth by undermining the very notion of analyticity typically understood as propositions that are known in virtue of understanding the words and concepts contained within them. He concludes that an analytic proposition is not necessarily known in virtue of understanding the meaning of the words, since one could know the meaning of the words but refuse to assent to an analytic proposition. In Chapter 7 Williamson shows that thought experiments are not, in some sense, peculiarly philosophical, since the reasoning we employ during philosophical thought experiments are the same sort of reasoning employed in the sciences and everyday life. If this is true, then we would have less reason to

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<sup>145</sup> Williamson, Timothy. *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007. 3.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid. 3.

believe that philosophy is exceptional. If philosophical exceptionalism is false, then the view that philosophy is a science should be more plausible.

Now consider the question: is the method of philosophy capable of making progress? Pre-theoretically, without engaging in dilemmas about what the method of philosophy happens to be, Williamson suggests that, “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.”<sup>147</sup> However you might imagine it, it seems obvious that progress in philosophy is *very* slow. If most of our steps forward in philosophy are mistaken, how do we know we are heading in the right direction? Williamson suggests we can improve our performance with more patience and better judgement. He adds,

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.<sup>148</sup>

And here we see the justification for the view that philosophy is making methodological progress: there are various standards in the profession, some higher and some lower, and presumably, the higher standards are correlated with the better schools. He gives us an example: the methods of Frege can now be effectively taught; some schools do it and others don’t. This is evidence that philosophy makes progress: schools with higher standards produce better work than schools with lower standards. So the answer to my question, ‘how do I know I’m going in the right direction, methodologically speaking?’ is this: ‘look and see what they are doing at the best schools.’ But what is worrisome is that when I look to Oxford, Timothy Williamson tells me philosophy is a scientific discipline, but Peter Hacker tells me that philosophy is not a cognitive discipline at all.

Williamson also gives us historical evidence that philosophy makes scientific progress,

we know much more in 2007 than was known in 1957; much more was known in 1957 than in 1907; much more was known in 1907 than was known in 1857. As in natural science, something can be collectively known in a community even if it is occasionally denied by eccentric members of that community.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid. 280.

We already know that examples of philosophical progress are often given, and the theories referred to are presented as *true*. For Williamson, the knowledge we have achieved in philosophy is true in the sense that scientific theories are true. But I am suspicious, and here's why. I imagine sitting down with Aristotle and asking him if the discipline of philosophy has made progress. And he tells me, 'Most certainly it has. Just look at the philosophy of Plato, mistaken in many ways, but I have found the flaws in his theories and I've produced better theories of my own.' He would then give me a list of theories which he is certain are true. I imagine sitting down with Descartes and asking him the progress question, and he tells me, 'Most certainly philosophy has made progress. I have recently developed a method of philosophy based on the model of geometry, which is the most certain system of knowledge we have. I am confident that philosophy will make similar advancements.' And I imagine sitting down with Kant and he tells me that the history of philosophy is a great blunder, but not anymore, since he is almost finished the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and finally philosophy will have the proper foundation required for all scientific inquiry. I ask Williamson and he says, 'Just look at what Frege has accomplished. We are on the verge of a new age, finally, we have achieved a sharper philosophical vision. Philosophy can finally make progress.' But it's the same story over and over. Given the track record of philosophy and the dramatic disagreement still prevalent within the discipline today, I think we are owed a better explanation.

The general idea for Williamson is that more rigor, more accuracy, better judgments, less impressionistic methods, and less deliberate pursuit of depth will lead to philosophical progress. Thus, making progress in philosophy is achieved by trying harder and giving more attention to our methods. He thinks that if we can get everyone on board emulating the rigor of Frege, then philosophy will make progress: "we can make progress in philosophy, we cannot expect to do so when we are not working at the highest available level of intellectual discipline."<sup>150</sup> It's true that attention to detail and higher standards will help produce better philosophical work. That's something that has been true for all disciplines and activities that have ever existed, ever. But why has philosophy taken so absolutely, incredibly long to make progress? I doubt that it's solely because philosophers don't have high enough standards. Some of the most intelligent minds to have ever existed were philosophers. I suspect there is a deeper reason why philosophy

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid. 286.

has not made much scientific progress. Nevertheless, Williamson urges that we can start making more scientific progress because we have methods available to us that are better than any of the methods philosophers had in the past: namely, the modern methods of logical and semantic analysis.

Does philosophy make progress? According Williamson, philosophy makes scientific progress. And we can make more of it if we work hard and raise our standards. We need to take logical and semantic analysis seriously in philosophy; we ought to be trained in symbolic logic and metaphysical modality if we want to make progress. Philosophy is capable of coming up with true theories, examples can be given. Philosophical exceptionalism is false; it's time we stopped digging for depth and started thinking of philosophy as an ordinary scientific discipline.

## 2.22: The Diversity of Philosophical Progress

We observe no real controversy over whether or not science makes progress. Philosophers often tell me that scientific progress has been disputed; some philosophers don't think the sciences make progress. To that I usually respond, it's only philosophers that deny the progress of science. The technological advances that have emerged as a result of scientific knowledge is brute and undeniable evidence that science makes progress. Philosophy, however, has no such uncontroversial brute evidence to rely on for the case for progress.

I believe that in order to clearly formulate a view on philosophical progress, one must first implicitly hold some conception of what the aim of philosophy is. For example, Dietrich did not believe that philosophical theories are *ever* true, so we might infer that he implicitly believes that philosophers aim to produce true theories, but *always* fail horrendously. Chalmers said that philosophy aims at truth, and he briefly mentioned alternative philosophical aims but dismissed them. Moody's view on philosophical aims is different. He thinks philosophers would be unable to specify a definite aim for what they are doing. It would be inadequate to say, 'philosophy aims at truth', because the aim of truth cannot be specified in any clear way. Hacker denies that the aim of philosophy is to contribute to human knowledge. Instead, he conceives the aim of philosophy as a contribution to human understanding, and our task is to clarify concepts and dissolve confusions. Williamson is never explicit about what the aims of philosophy are, nevertheless, an implicit aim can be extrapolated. The aim is the same as science: to discover

knowledge of the world. So he gives evidence that philosophy has done just that, and therefore philosophy makes scientific progress.

In any case that we wish to advance a position on philosophical progress, we must first say *something* about our aims in philosophy. Drawing on the central insight of Chapter 1, there is no universal aim of philosophy. This is why the various conceptions of philosophical progress are so diverse—we have not yet agreed on a common aim in philosophy. It's not merely the case that I don't know what the aim of philosophy is, but it's the case that any candidate aim could not be universally characteristic of the discipline, since any philosopher can deny that aim. Insofar as our aims in philosophy are contested, so too are our conceptions of progress in philosophy. I'm not sure how to go about reconciling all the various possible conceptions of progress, many of which are likely to be incompatible. But I do think philosophy doesn't make scientific progress, so I'll start there.

### **2.23: An Argument against Scientific Progress in Philosophy**

It wasn't until the scientific revolution which took place during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries that science really began to distinguish itself from philosophy. The term 'scientist' was not coined until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to the scientific revolution, scientists went by the title: 'natural philosophers'. Looking back at the history, it seems to me that science has gradually divorced itself from philosophy, as questions that were once philosophical in nature have been stolen by the sciences. With each science that divorces from philosophy, philosophy consequently loses part of its identity, and must come to grips with its loss.

There is a tendency among contemporary philosophers to think of philosophy as a scientific discipline. Its most general aims and methods are the same as science. And concerning the progress of philosophy, philosophers think that philosophy can make progress like the sciences. In this section I'd like to present an argument that philosophy does not make scientific progress.

- 1) A necessary condition for scientific progress is general methodological consensus.

There are fundamental methodological commitments that every scientist tacitly commits to. For example, chemistry has well-established procedures for experimentation. When we learn to do chemistry in a lab, there are very specific instructions to be followed, and those instructions

are very similar to the methods used in all chemistry labs (i.e. common instruments and devices, and universal methods of observation and recording). The fact that there is procedural agreement in chemistry allows the science to agree on its findings.

There are fundamental methods that if rejected by someone in the scientific community, that person would be excluded from science. For example, someone who denies that theories need to be empirically verified would be excluded from the community. The method of science is, for the most part, given by the agreements in the scientific community. These agreements have been established by years of research and scientific practice.

One might suggest that part of the job of the scientist is to test new methods and find out if they worked or not. Indeed, scientists can disagree about methods as well. There can often be controversy about whether or not methods work in science. In these cases, science is still working things out, still conducting research, finding new data, and etc. Eventually, science comes to a consensus on what the best methods are. Insofar as certain methods in science are controversial, the information given by those methods would remain inconclusive until consensus is established. When the community comes to an agreement, we have scientific progress.

## 2) Philosophy does not have general methodological consensus.

There is not any fundamental methodological commitment that every philosopher commits to. As we saw, the methods of thought experiments and reliance on intuitions are highly controversial. Some philosophers think that intuitions have no epistemic value, others think intuitions are the most fundamental or ultimate justification, and others deny that philosophers rely on intuitions at all in the first place. One might suppose that the situation is similar to science. Some theories or methods in science might be experiencing a similar amount of controversy, for example, string theory. If science can make progress despite the disagreement, why should we think it's a problem for philosophy? Because science eventually comes to a consensus on the best way to go about conducting research, but philosophy throughout history has continually reconceived its methods of inquiry in radical ways.

When there is a controversy in science, we can expect that with time, science will make new discoveries that will reconcile the controversy. In philosophy, some controversies have been

around since antiquity, and we expect that philosophical solutions to them are usually mistaken. In some important sense, it is the irresolvable controversy that makes philosophical problems *philosophical*. If we could solve them, they wouldn't be philosophical anymore. Unlike science, which thrives on solutions and new knowledge, philosophy thrives on the un-resolvability of the most profound problems imaginable.

Philosophical methodology is itself a philosophical topic so it's subject to philosophical dispute. That's the primary reason why philosophers do not have universally shared methods. Throughout history, philosophers time and time again have the ambition to solve the problems of philosophy by devising a new and proper method. If we could establish the proper foundation of inquiry we could finally answer the biggest philosophical questions. But every attempt has failed.

Although it is important, there is no science of scientific methodology.<sup>151</sup> In contrast, philosophers are capable of doing philosophy of philosophical methodology, but it is a problematic discourse. Meta-philosophy is an inquiry that is relatively new on the scene, and there are questions that have yet to be adequately addressed. Ironically, philosophy is one of the oldest disciplines, yet its method has never been adequately established. One might have thought that before we could begin inquiry as a discipline we must first know what the proper methods of the discipline are. This seems true for most disciplines, but for philosophy, it's evidently not so. One can do philosophy without spending one second reflecting on its methods, but one cannot play chess without having been taught the rules first. Philosophy is like a game where playing comes first and rules come second, as though we create the rules by playing the game. In contrast, in order to participate in science, one must first learn the rules of science.

### 3) Therefore, philosophy does not make scientific progress.

Scientific progress depends on methodological consensus. If scientists simply could not agree on what methods are proper and which are not, the findings of science would be severely undermined. Suppose there were some new instrument that was invented that allowed scientists to observe phenomena at a sub-atomic level that has never before been observed. Now suppose half the scientific community thought that the new instrument was veridical, but half the

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<sup>151</sup> Scientists do sometimes reflect on their methodology, in which case they would be doing philosophy of science.

community thought it was not due to some controversy over how the mechanism functioned. Some scientists think that the sub-atomic objects stimulate the device in such a way that valuable information is observed, and they have a theory that explains how this works. Other scientists think that the internal mechanism of the device systematically conjures artifacts that do not appropriately describe the sub-atomic objects, and they have a theory that explains how the device does this. Now suppose given all the relevant data available to us, we are unable to decisively determine which hypothesis is true, i.e., whether the device is veridical or the device is not. What we would see, is that insofar as both hypotheses remain contested, scientific progress would be hindered until there is consensus on the veridicality of the instrument.

This is the situation we have in philosophy. Thought experiments and intuitions are analogous to the instrument in science which has not yet achieved consensus on its use. But what's worse is that philosophy is not likely to come to a consensus on the veridicality of intuitions, whereas science has a track record of methods which achieve communal consensus. When there is controversy in science, the best thing to do is wait for additional information before making a decision. In philosophy, however, what new information is there to wait for? What new information could possibly motivate consensus on the proper function, limits, and reliability of intuitions and thought experiments? The controversy in philosophy is even more radical than mere disagreement over the reliability of intuitions. Some philosophers deny that we rely on intuitions altogether.

A common objection to my view is that the Gettier cases have achieved a general consensus in philosophy. They say that the Gettier cases were *successful*, i.e., they effectively demonstrated that knowledge is not merely justified true belief, and nearly the whole philosophical community agreed with this. So what we have is a methodological consensus too, since the thought experiments employed by Gettier were accepted as appropriate. But the Gettier case is an outlier; it's not representative of the vast majority of thought experiments in philosophy. Here's what Cappelen says about it: "the consensus generated about Gettier's cases is extremely unusual in philosophy and so in this respect the Gettier case is an anomaly."<sup>152</sup> Not to mention that the literature surrounding the Gettier cases have been dominated by analytic epistemologists who vociferously proclaim the success of the cases. I think it's dangerous to

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid. 194.

place all one's eggs in the Gettier basket. In statistics, outliers can severely skew data, so outliers are often removed from the pool simply on the assumption that some external cause is influencing it. Generally, an anomaly does not overturn an otherwise well-established theory. The best way to address an anomaly is to search for additional data that would help explain it. It's not unreasonable to think that there are some external unknown factors helping produce the consensus generated by the Gettier cases. There is room for doubt about whether or not they can accurately represent what philosophical methodology is capable of.

Another objection to my view is that the methods of science are more diverse than I suppose. My argument relies on the premise: 1) a necessary condition for scientific progress is general methodological consensus. One might object to this premise by claiming that there is methodological controversy within science, so the controversy is not local to philosophy. I grant that there are cases in which scientists might be in disagreement about the validity of certain methods, but I think that the disagreement is not as deep and fundamental as the sort found in philosophy. Science in general is characterized and often defined in terms of its general methodology: namely, the process of coming up with hypotheses, conducting experiments, performing proofs, making observations, recording data, etc., and verifying, modifying, or rejecting the initial hypothesis. This general method of science is not controversial. Controversies emerge only when we get to the particular cases where scientists start conducting new and innovative experiments. The general method of science accommodates these minor disagreements, and eventually, scientists come to agreement as to whether or not these new methods are successful or not. Insofar as scientists do not come to agreement, scientific progress is hindered. Philosophy, on the other hand, cannot be conceived nor defined in terms of a general philosophical methodology. Any attempt to do so will ultimately be philosophically problematic.<sup>153</sup> So I contend that philosophy is characterized by a radical methodological controversy, and science is not.

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<sup>153</sup> Recall the problem of distinction and the problem of unification. Any method intended to characterize philosophy in general would either fail to adequately distinguish philosophy from other sorts of inquiry, or it would fail to adequately describe philosophers in general.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter we surveyed some conceptions about progress in philosophy and investigated some of the discussion concerning philosophical methodology. What we found was there are multiple conceptions of progress in philosophy that are as varied as our aims in philosophy. There is a controversy in philosophy concerning the methods of thought experiments and intuitions. Since philosophical methodology is a philosophical topic, it's also subject to philosophical dispute. This makes philosophical methodology more problematic than scientific methodology, and it's the primary reason why philosophy cannot make scientific progress. Some important questions remain open: what are the proper aims and methods of philosophy? What has been shown thus far, are the obstacles facing these meta-philosophical questions. In the next chapter, we will discuss the nature of philosophy in light of what has been discovered.

## **Chapter 3: What is Philosophy?**

### **3.1: The Illumination of Problems**

One of my goals in the past two chapters has been to distinguish between philosophy and science. I think they are fundamentally different, and to suppose philosophy is a science is to severely distort what philosophy is. Luckily, philosophy is a discipline that is capable of reflecting on its own aims and methods, and therefore it's capable of changing its own aims and methods. It's possible for us to reconceive our aims and give our methods new meaning and purpose. As we already saw, there are diverse candidate aims available to philosophers. I suggest the following aim for philosophy: *To keep the mystery of truth and knowledge alive.*

The Gettier cases force us to question what knowledge is, and I think that's the most valuable aspect of them. It's not that Gettier cases destroyed Plato's theory that makes them valuable, but it's the fact that they challenge what we think knowledge is, that's valuable. It's not that Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* effectively remedied us from philosophical quandary that makes them valuable. After all, virtually no one thinks he succeeded in dissolving all philosophical confusion, and if anything, he created more. The value of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was not that he established the transcendental limits of reason, but because he showed us new possibilities and ways of understanding ourselves and our relation to the world. The value of Descartes' cogito was not that we have achieved certainty of our ordinary beliefs, but because it was an ingenious attempt to solidify our beliefs that nevertheless failed. We wonder, if not Descartes' system, then what? All great philosophical works leave us in mystery and suspense, for they illuminate for us what we have not yet completely understood, and that's the essential motivation for all inquiry in general.

We have already surveyed a number of different conceptions of progress in philosophy. Hacker and Moody presented alternative conceptions of progress. I think it's clear that given the diversity of aims in philosophy there will also be a diversity of conceptions about philosophical progress. If the aim of philosophy is to keep the mystery of truth and knowledge alive, has philosophy succeeded in this? This question is misleading, however, because most philosophers probably do not strive to create mystery about knowledge. There might be a sense in which new

celebrated philosophical works do succeed in stimulating discussion and interest in philosophy and so would be thought to be a form of progress. Other works might not have the same effect. They might be boring or pointless, so we might think that's regress. I like what Moody and Kekes said about contemporary philosophers: "Their debates have become sterile and incapable of making any contribution to humanity."<sup>154</sup> To be successful in philosophy is simply to find something worth thinking about, and so it should be a valuable contribution to humanity. Scientific progress is marked by new knowledge of the world, technological advancements, and discoveries. Philosophical progress, on the other hand, can be marked by interesting, new, and original ideas, new ways of thinking about old topics, heated disagreement and argumentation, and fascination and interest in a younger generation. Scientific progress is made when the community comes to an agreement on the validity of its findings. Philosophical progress is made when we succeed in motivating inquiry.

This is *not* to say that philosophy never comes up with new knowledge, nor does this imply that science never motivates inquiry. The boundaries of philosophy and science, I think, overlap in many ways, yet there must be some fundamental distinction between the two. Indeed, science can be philosophical, but so can art, music, movies, and video games. Philosophy can be scientific, but it can also be artistic. What philosophy needs to be, first and foremost, is *philosophical*. To ask what that means is perhaps the biggest question of meta-philosophy.

### **3.2: Philosophy as a Family Resemblance Concept**

Perhaps thinking of philosophy as a family resemblance concept would be beneficial. The attempt to properly define the concept is mistaken from the very beginning, and the way we ought to understand philosophy is merely through the network of similarities which we observe in the actions of individuals and the norms and tendencies we observe in the literature. These resemblances over a wide array of features and characteristics would form a network that could explain the use of, and understanding of, the concept 'philosophy'. Hans-Johann Glock has argued extensively in his book *What is Analytic Philosophy?* that analytic philosophy is held together by ties of historical influence and family resemblances. One might attempt to apply the same strategy to philosophy in general. Another related work is a piece by Morris Weitz titled:

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<sup>154</sup> Moody, Todd. "Progress in Philosophy." *American Philosophical Quarterly*: Vol. 23, Number 1, 1986. 42.

*The Role of Theory in Aesthetics.* The problems philosophers run into when trying to define art are similar to the problems we run into when we try to understand philosophy. It might be useful to adopt Weitz's insight that art is a family resemblance concept and try thinking of philosophy in this way. I will begin by reviewing Weitz's article, and explore how one might formulate his insights to be about philosophy. I argue that philosophy is not a family resemblance concept by denying the resemblance. The various clusters of resemblances in philosophy are so radically different from each other that they could not constitute a family of resemblances.

It might be worthwhile to clarify/discuss an important distinction, namely, descriptive vs. prescriptive definitions. A descriptive definition is one that intends to describe the nature of something as it exists in the world. The descriptive definition might consist of observations and should stand as a matter of fact. A prescriptive definition is normative, meaning, it intends to offer some suggestion as to what or how something ought to be. A prescriptive definition would include a value judgment. My primary concern throughout this thesis has been focused on the descriptive side of the distinction (for example, my arguments that philosophy is not a science, and that philosophy does not make scientific progress, I think, are descriptive). I have not argued that philosophy *ought* not to be a science, I've argued that philosophy *is* not a science.

Descriptive claims often carry normative implications, for example, if philosophy *is* not a science, then we *ought* not to treat it like it is a science. In the following section, Weitz discusses definitions of art that carry both descriptive and prescriptive weight, but the distinction can easily be obscured. For example, we might be wondering, are we talking about what art is, or are we talking about what *good* art is? And maybe, if art becomes *bad* enough to a sufficient degree, it will no longer be art at all. And likewise for philosophy, if some work is *so* bad, then it wouldn't be considered philosophy. The distinction between philosophy and sophistry, I believe, is an example of this.

In his paper, Weitz argues that it is not possible to give a true definition or set of necessary and sufficient properties of art,

Aesthetic theory—all of it—is wrong in principle in thinking that a correct theory is possible because it radically misconstrues the logic of the concept of art. Its main

contention that “art” is amenable to real or any kind of true definition is false. Its attempt to discover the necessary and sufficient properties of art is logically misbegotten<sup>155</sup>

We could formulate the same thesis in response to our inquiry in meta-philosophy. We might say, ‘meta-philosophical theory—all of it—is wrong in principle in thinking that a correct theory is possible; a real or true definition is impossible, an attempt to discover necessary and sufficient properties of philosophy is logically misbegotten.’ I think this thesis is absolutely true for meta-philosophical inquiry. Given the diversity of philosophical aims and methods, it would be impossible to provide a clear and specific definition of philosophy in general. The meta-philosophical investigation we have done up to this point supports that thesis.

Philosophers might think that if we cannot give a definition of art or a definition of philosophy, then aesthetic theory or meta-philosophical inquiry must be meaningless or worthless—we should not bother ourselves with the questions: ‘what is art?’ and ‘what is philosophy?’ However, Weitz does not think aesthetic theory is worthless,

I shall not argue from this, as too many others have done, that its logical confusions render it meaningless or worthless. On the contrary, I wish to reassess its role and its contribution primarily in order to show that it is of the greatest importance to our understanding of the arts.<sup>156</sup>

The skepticism in meta-philosophy is analogous. It might be supposed that the meta-philosophical question is futile.<sup>157</sup> However, I believe that the meta-philosophical question is of the utmost importance. We cannot be sure of what we are trying to accomplish in philosophy, nor what the best way of going about philosophizing is, if we are not willing to face the meta-philosophical question.

Weitz believes that aesthetic theory is of the greatest importance to our understanding of the arts, whereas I believe that meta-philosophical theory is of the greatest importance to our understanding of philosophy. Much of what Wietz says about art is true, but for the wrong reason. On my view, both art and philosophy are not family resemblance concepts. My task is to explain to you why this is so, but first we will examine how the notion of family resemblance

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<sup>155</sup> Weitz, Morris. “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XV (1956), 27-35, 1.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>157</sup> For example, Popper says, “‘a philosopher should philosophise: he should try to solve philosophical problems, rather than talk about philosophy’”. Rorty says, “‘questions about “the method of philosophy” or about “the nature of philosophical problems”... ‘are likely to prove unprofitable’.” (Burwood, Gilbert, and Overgaard pp. 6)

changes the way we think about art, and how family resemblance could give us insight for understanding the concept of philosophy.

Weitz makes the distinction between what he calls an open and a closed concept. The closed concept is one for which we can specify necessary and sufficient conditions; an open concept is one for which we cannot. The way in which we understand closed concepts is by knowing the definition of the concept. The way we understand open concepts is not by a definition, but by family resemblances. Weitz gives us the relevant quotations found in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*,

“let us consider what we call “games”: “I mean board-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don’t say: ‘there *must* be something common, or they would not be called “games”’ but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.”<sup>158</sup>

Weitz continues,

What we find are no necessary and sufficient properties, only “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing,” such that we can say of games that they form a family with family resemblances and no common trait. If one asks what a game is, we pick out sample games, describe these, and add, “This and *similar things* are called ‘games.’<sup>159</sup>

He then draws the similarity between games and art. We look and see what art is, and that is how we understand what art is. In this sense, our understanding of art would be descriptive.<sup>160</sup> We do not understand what art is by knowing a definition,<sup>161</sup> instead we know what art is by recognizing strands of similarities. When we look and see art around us, we will not find any essential property that could be said to be universal—there is no property or characteristic that

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>160</sup> I think family resemblance concepts can obscure the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive definitions. For example, the network of similarities which we would describe when we *look and see* would provide a descriptive definition. But as we examine all the various candidate cases that may or may not be qualified within the family, the descriptive definition becomes prescriptive, since we must make a value judgment as to whether or not certain cases are to be included within the family. For example, an ‘artist’ placed a garbage can in the middle of a room as part of his art exhibit. Should we qualify this as art or not? The descriptive/prescriptive distinction has been obscured.

<sup>161</sup> Nevertheless, we can still attempt to formulate a definition of a family resemblance concept. In which case, it would merely be honorific, but it would still be useful in the sense that it brings our attention to important aspects of the concept that we already possess.

would be found in all cases of art. So far this sounds a lot like philosophy, since philosophy has no universal aims or methods, nor can we specify necessary and sufficient conditions for it.

He concludes that art is an open concept: “New conditions (cases) have constantly arisen and will undoubtedly constantly arise; new art forms, new movements will emerge”.<sup>162</sup> Thus, it would appear that the concept of art is constantly changing, since what constitutes understanding of art is nothing but the recognition of networks of similarities, and those similarities might change depending on what new forms of art emerge. This new understanding of the concept of art is relevant to aesthetics because it gives the discipline a new starting point to make progress.

The role of theory in aesthetics for Weitz is to elucidate the concept of art. The theories which philosophers come up with to define art are merely honorific definitions,

In each of the great theories of art, whether correctly understood as honorific definitions or incorrectly accepted as real definitions, what is of the utmost importance are the reasons proffered in the argument for the respective theory<sup>163</sup>

An honorific definition is a definition that is not real or true, but merely presented and argued for to draw our attention to some relevant features of art that are important for descriptive and evaluative use. Here we see that the honorific definitions of art are not merely *descriptive*, but they carry evaluative use, i.e., normative implications. Let’s examine how these insights about art might be construed about philosophy.

We would argue that philosophy is a family resemblance concept because if we look and see the philosophy around us, we do not recognize any universal property or characteristic in all cases of philosophy. Thus, we understand what philosophy is, not by knowing the definition of philosophy, but by recognizing strands of similarities: ‘a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing’. Therefore, philosophy is an open concept by Weitz’ taxonomy, one that cannot be defined since it has no necessary and sufficient conditions. New cases of philosophy have constantly arisen and will undoubtedly constantly arise: new philosophical ways of thinking, new movements, etc. So far this sounds like a useful way of thinking about the concept of philosophy.

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. 6.

Weitz suggests that the great theories of aesthetics are honorific definitions, and that they are still useful for the purpose of appraising and evaluating art. Philosophers do not seem to be in the business of appraising philosophical work in the way that aesthetic theorists appraise art. However, philosophers do criticize philosophical work. They say things like: ‘this is terrible philosophy’, or, ‘this is excellent philosophy’. And I take the insight to be that whatever definition the philosopher has in mind that constitutes good and bad philosophy is also an *honorific* definition—honorific in the sense that the definitions of philosophy are not *real* definitions, but merely direct our attention to important aspects of philosophy. Weitz is right that our definitions of philosophy and art are honorific definitions, but he’s wrong that they are family resemblance concepts. I explain why in the next section.

### **3.3: Philosophy as an Essentially Contested Concept**

Which concepts are family resemblance concepts? The paradigmatic case is games; that’s the example Wittgenstein gave when he first explained the notion. But I’ve heard philosophers attribute the notion to all sorts of concepts. There does not seem to be any systematic way of determining which concepts are closed, and which are family resemblance concepts. In fact, I think, in some obscure sense, almost all concepts are family resemblance concepts. For example, if ‘games’ is a family resemblance concept, is ‘vehicles’ a family resemblance concept? Is ‘furniture’ a family resemblance concept? Is ‘rudeness’ a family resemblance concept? Specific concrete concepts are easier to define, and more general concepts are harder to define. So we might think that ‘bottles’ is a closed concept because it is relatively concrete compared to ‘rudeness’. But we could argue about what bottles are, which objects are and which are not bottles.<sup>164</sup> After becoming frustrated that we cannot agree on the definition of ‘bottles’, we might simply concede that it’s a family resemblance concept. So even the more basic concepts risk turning into family resemblance concepts. It’s ridiculous to say that nearly all concepts are family resemblance concepts; I think we’ve got to start drawing the line somewhere. Part of the problem, sadly, is that the notion of family resemblance is itself a concept, and it’s not a closed concept, i.e., no necessary and sufficient conditions have ever been given for it. Thus, ‘family resemblance’ itself might be a family resemblance concept. If we take that seriously, then we’d recognize that the way in which we come to know and understand ‘family resemblance’ is by

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<sup>164</sup> Could a jug be a bottle?

*looking and seeing* family resemblance concepts. But this is viciously circular, and we are never given an adequate way of determining which concepts are actually family resemblance concepts.

Is philosophy a family resemblance concept? I think not. Part of the following discussion is an attempt to determine what kinds of concepts are not family resemblance concepts, lest we think that the vast majority of our concepts are family resemblance concepts. There are two primary ways I go about doing this. Firstly, if we apply the notion of family resemblance to philosophy in the way that Wittgenstein applied it to games, it's not clear that the similarities we observe can constitute a family. Secondly, if we compare the concept of philosophy to the paradigmatic case of games, we'll notice that the concept of philosophy is different from games in fundamental ways. Philosophy is not a family resemblance concept, instead, it's an essentially contested one.

The concept of philosophy consists of dissimilarities, not overlapping and crisscrossing, but dividing and excluding. One of my motivations for meta-philosophical inquiry is that so frequently I observe that philosophers have entirely different methods of doing philosophy, and entirely different aims of inquiry in the first place. It is clear that philosophers do philosophy in radically different ways. If what constitutes a family resemblance are the similarities which we observe when we *look and see*, I must admit, I do not see those similarities across philosophy in general. For example, the continental/analytic divide presents cases where, on the one side, work resembles poetry, while on the other, work resembles mathematics. Another divide resides within analytic philosophy itself, namely, philosophical formalism and ordinary language philosophy. The former holds that philosophical problems can be solved by a closer attention to formal logic, while the latter thinks otherwise. Dummett describes ordinary language philosophers: "for them, the attempt to be systematic in philosophy was the primal error, founded upon a total misconception of the character of the subject."<sup>165</sup> If we want to think of philosophy as a family resemblance concept, these radical divisions need to be explained. But instead of desperately searching for some similarities which could bridge these divides, I think that the concept of philosophy is more complicated than family resemblance would suggest.

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<sup>165</sup> Dummett, M.A.E. "Can Analytic Philosophy be Systematic, and Ought it to Be?" *Truth and Other Enigmas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978. 438.

Other family resemblance concepts have very different specific cases as well. For example, consider games. If we took a bit of baseball and compared it to a bit of chess, they would both appear to be so radically different that it would not make sense to call them both games. However, there *are* relevant similarities and facts that warrant the classification of baseball and chess within the category of games. There are two teams which compete against one another for an exclusive end, namely, the victory. Now this is not to say that an exclusive end and two teams are necessary or sufficient conditions to be classified as a game, instead, it is only a feature that we observe in enough cases of games such that it could warrant the classification. It is merely a *similarity* which we recognize that is also relevant to our understanding of games in general. Another general feature of games would be leisurely enjoyment and others could be named.

What makes a general characteristic *relevant* to our understanding of a concept is the fact that it allows us to make distinctions between games and other activities that are not games. For example, we would not suppose that taking out the trash is a game because it is too different from the class of activities which we have already decided to call games. We could define games in such a way that would allow taking out the trash to be a game, but this only goes to show just how plastic (or honorific) our definitions of family resemblance concepts really are. The problem is that for the most radically different games that are out there, there is always at least some relevant similarities that are characteristic of games in general. But for the most radically different cases of what we call philosophy, it is quite difficult to find some relevant similarities that are characteristic of philosophy in general. Some traditions of philosophy seem to have absolutely no resemblance to other traditions; we might think of them as different subjects entirely. Games do not have the same categorical dilemma.

Games are very diverse, this is true, but they are not so diverse that there is some serious controversy over whether or not an entire class of activities should be classified as games. Philosophy is so diverse that we question whether or not certain cases of written work counts as philosophy at all. The dissimilarity among different types of philosophy is so radical that to classify them within the same discipline seems like a category mistake. I observe that some philosophers resemble other philosophers about as much as planes resemble caterpillars. Analytic philosophers resemble mathematicians more than they resemble their continental

counterparts.<sup>166</sup> Some philosophers resemble poets and literary artists more than their analytic counterparts. The various branches of philosophy, in a world where there was more funding for academics, could be divided into separate independent disciplines. For example, logic and ethics could be their own independent disciplines, and they would only be thought to be philosophical disciplines in the sense that any PhD is a doctor of philosophy.

If we try and think of philosophy as a family resemblance concept, a serious problem emerges that I think is more problematic than other ‘ordinary’ family resemblance concepts. The problem can be expressed by a question: ‘what are the general features of philosophy?’ The first thing to do is bracket aside any irrelevant features. For example: all games are activities, but that’s an irrelevant feature, since all things people do are activities. For philosophy: all philosophers *think*, but that’s irrelevant because all people think. Irrelevant features are those that fail to distinguish the concept in some relevant way from other concepts. The next step is to specify what features are relevant, and that’s where the problems ensue. Any candidate relevant feature of philosophy is philosophically problematic. As we saw, the aims of truth, knowledge, foundational knowledge, synthetic a priori knowledge, are all philosophically problematic. The methods of philosophy, the Socratic Method, methodological doubt, transcendental philosophy, thought experiments, intuitions, and science oriented practice are all philosophically problematic. Games, however, do not have the same conspicuous conceptual dilemma, i.e., it’s not controversial or problematic that most games have teams, some criteria for winning, an aspect of enjoyment, and etc. But for the concept of philosophy, it *is* problematic to suppose that most philosophers use intuitions; it *is* problematic to suppose that most philosophers are science oriented; it *is* problematic that most philosophers aim at truth. The relevant features and similarities of philosophy are more problematic than those of games. Thus, to suppose that philosophy is a family resemblance concept does not remedy our conceptual confusions about philosophy.

Philosophy is not a family resemblance concept because we cannot, un-problematically, formulate a set of general characteristics of philosophy which could then be thought to constitute

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<sup>166</sup> Consider this anecdote, “In 1992 Derrida’s name was put forward for the award of an honorary degree from Cambridge University. Very unusually a number of Cambridge academics objected to the award... a letter appeared in *The Times*, signed by Barry Smith and eighteen other philosophers, objecting to the honour on the grounds that ‘M.Derrida’s work does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour’. The letter accuses Derrida of employing ‘a written style that defies comprehension’.” (Burwood, Gilbert, and Overgaard p. 162)

a family of philosophical properties. For example, we might try and give a list of observed general properties: a) philosophers ask fundamental questions, b) philosophers seek truth and knowledge, c) philosophers use thought experiments and rely on intuitions, and so on. None of these general characteristics are necessary or sufficient for doing philosophy, but we'd say that most instances of philosophy possess these characteristics. The problem is that there could be some brand of philosophy that rejects every candidate general property of philosophy—as we have defined it—in favor of a different set of general properties. We can imagine some philosophy where, as a matter of fact, no fundamental questions are asked, truth and knowledge is not sought in any clear way, no thought experiments are used, and no intuitions are relied on. When presented with this case, we feel a very strong inclination to shout: ‘well, it’s not philosophy!’ The person whose work is described in this way might be some young person who has never done philosophy before, but is nevertheless trying to figure it out. Or it might be some genius who came up with a new meta-philosophical conception that challenges our understanding of philosophy. The problematic question, then, is: ‘who gets to determine which family resemblance concept of philosophy is the right one?’ Or in other words: ‘what is the correct meta-philosophical perspective?’ If we attempt to get down into the details of what a family resemblance concept of philosophy is supposed to look like, it would be highly controversial. Philosophers from other traditions might outright reject our own preferred conception of philosophy. And when they present theirs, we might be baffled by what they think philosophy is.

Weitz, in discussing the concept of art, brought up the idea of an *honorific* definition. Recall: an honorific definition is not one that is true or real, but it is still useful because it brings our attention to important aspects of the definiendum. I think this is true for both philosophy and art: any definition of art or philosophy is not true or real, but merely points out important aspects of the concept. Consider the question: are all definitions of family resemblance concepts honorific? Consider games. We might define games in the following way: games usually have teams, they are fun, and they have a victory condition. Is it honorific to say this about games? Is it untrue or unreal? I don’t think there is anything ‘honorific’ about defining games in this way. To say a definition is ‘honorific’ only makes sense when the concept is essentially contested, i.e., when there are multiple, mutually exclusive and controversial definitions. For example, the various definitions of art are mutually exclusive; some definitions undermine the points of the

other definitions. Likewise for philosophy: one person's preferred definition of philosophy might contradict another person's definition. This is one of the fundamental features of *essentially contested concepts*, and on my view, essentially contested concepts cannot be family resemblance concepts because the similarities which constitute the family are contested. Paradigmatic examples of essentially contested concepts are: philosophy, art, justice, feminism, love, truth, goodness, etc. Essentially contested concepts are usually the biggest topics of philosophical inquiry.

As a consequence, I am committed to the view that Wietz was incorrect for thinking that art is a family resemblance concept. Although, I think he was right that the definitions of art are honorific, he thought so for the wrong reasons: art is not a family resemblance concept, it's an essentially contested concept. W.B. Gallie first came up with the term, and in his paper he argues that art is an essentially contested concept. He writes,

“This picture is a work of art” is liable to be contested because of an evident disagreement as to—and the consequent need for philosophical elucidation of—the proper general use of the term “work of art”.<sup>167</sup>

On Wietz's view, art is a family resemblance concept, and the way we ought to understand it is by “the elucidation of the actual employment of the concept of art.”<sup>168</sup> Here we see the fundamental problem. The essentially contested concept does not have an agreed proper use of the concept, but the family resemblance concept is formed by the actual employment (use) of the concept. My argument is that we cannot formulate a family resemblance concept unless we have an agreement on the proper use of the concept. And since we do not have agreement on the proper use of the concept of art and philosophy<sup>169</sup>, a family resemblance concept of art or philosophy would be highly controversial, and it would fail to adequately describe the actual employment of the concept (i.e. the concept of philosophy is used in so many conflicting ways that it could not be adequately described by a network of crisscrossing similarities). The actual employment of the concepts ‘art’ and ‘philosophy’ are controversial because we have not agreed on a proper usage. That fact disqualifies them from being family resemblance concepts.

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<sup>167</sup> Gallie, W.B. “Essentially Contested Concepts.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 56 (1955 - 1956), pp. 167-198. 167.

<sup>168</sup> Weitz, Morris. “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XV (1956), 27-35. 3.

<sup>169</sup> For philosophy, we don't have agreement on the proper aims and methods of the discipline.

One might object and say that ‘games’ is also an essentially contested concept. So maybe it’s both a family resemblance concept and an essentially contested concept. It’s true that philosophers probably could start arguing over various mutually exclusive definitions of ‘games’. But philosophers can also probably start arguing over various mutually exclusive definitions of ‘bottles’. I don’t think the concepts ‘games’ or ‘bottles’ are essentially contested. There is no serious *problem of distinction*, i.e., we have no difficulty distinguishing games from work, nor do we have any serious difficulty distinguishing bottles from jugs. Although there are cases in which we might have some difficulty distinguishing bottles from jugs and games from work (only at the penumbra), these problematic cases do not contest or challenge our understanding of the concepts. But for philosophy, art, justice, and so on, there are cases that fundamentally challenge our concepts of them. Essentially contested concepts are those that are contested at the very core of the concept.

Interestingly, Wittgenstein has never formulated a detailed description of a family resemblance concept. He never applied his own theory of family resemblance to mistakenly defined concepts in order to construct their meaning. Such an application can be seen in Glock’s work where he presents a chart where on the left side column are features of analytic philosophy, the top row lists analytic philosophers and analytic work.<sup>170</sup> The result is that each case of analytic philosophy has only some of the characteristics listed. Weitz also thinks that Wittgenstein’s family resemblance concept gives us a new way of analyzing concepts. The point I want to make is that Wittgenstein never constructed a chart that would explain what a family resemblance actually looks like, and I believe that this use of his notion of family resemblance was not his intention. To construct the general characteristics which constitute the family resemblance is to make the same mistake of trying to specify essential properties—we are trying to draw boundaries on a concept that is inherently vague. Wittgenstein’s family resemblance was not meant to be a starting point for us to analyze our concepts in a new way. Instead, it was a treatment for the philosophical ill: our incessant struggle to construct a theory that could explain the fundamental nature of some philosophical topic. But the notion of family resemblance is not meant to be a new way of analyzing concepts. It’s meant to show us that we do not need to

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<sup>170</sup> Glock, Hans-Johann. *What is Analytic Philosophy?* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 218.

analyze certain concepts in the first place. To provide a list of general characteristics as Glock does might be thought to be a specialized way of specifying a sufficient condition.

In Weitz's piece, he suggests we change the question, 'what is art?' to the question, 'what kind of concept is art?'

This, I take it, is the initial question, the begin-all if not the end-all of any philosophical problem and solution. Thus in aesthetics, our first problem is the elucidation of the actual employment of the concept of art<sup>171</sup>

If we formulate this in terms of a meta-philosophical question, we get: 'what kind of concept is philosophy?' And problematically: 'this initial question is, the begin-all if not the end-all of any philosophical problem and solution.' What I hoped to have made clear by now is that the features of philosophy are problematic. So to say with such conviction and dogma that the begin-all and end-all of all problems and solutions is *X*, is simply too bold for meta-philosophical inquiry. To assert a begin-all or end-all boundary for philosophy can only specify the domain of a particular kind of philosophy, and not philosophy in general. As we had seen, Williamson had argued that the conceptual turn in philosophy was a mistake. We are not merely interested in the concept of philosophy, but we are interested in *philosophy*, as it exists in the world and in our lives. Now if I might complicate the issue and suggest that the first problem cannot be the elucidation of the actual employment of the concept of philosophy because the conceptual investigations can both create and alter the actual employment of the concept. For example, in meta-philosophy we attempt to investigate the nature of philosophy, but we inevitably do philosophy in order to investigate it, and in doing so, we create what we investigate.

I hope to have shown that philosophy cannot be adequately understood as a family resemblance concept because the networks of similarities and resemblances are problematic in philosophy. However, this does not imply that philosophy must be understood as a closed concept (with necessary and sufficient conditions) which is what follows if we are limited to Weitz's taxonomy. The concept of philosophy is open, but not all open concepts must be understood as family resemblance concepts. Essentially contested concepts are open (they cannot

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<sup>171</sup> Weitz, Morris. "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XV (1956), 27-35. 3.

be defined with necessary and sufficient conditions), but are not family resemblance concepts. In the next sections, I will suggest a new way of understanding what philosophy is.

### **3.4: The Unity of Philosophy**

In this investigation, we have found that there are no universal aims or methods of philosophy. Consequently, there is no common goal that all philosophers are trying to achieve. It should not be surprising that if philosophers do not share a common goal, then they would not share the same methods either, since methods are designed to achieve our goals; it makes sense that our methods should correspond to our goals in philosophy. Insofar as our aims are diverse, so too are our methods. For example, philosophy done under a scientific meta-philosophical conception would be very different than philosophy done under an artistic meta-philosophical conception. The aim of the former might be to achieve objective knowledge about the world; the aim of the latter might be to create something original and important.

By abductive reasoning, I hypothesize that philosophy is an essentially divided discipline. Philosophy is not completely divided into tiny isolated chunks. There are clumps of shared aims and methods within philosophy, yet many of those clumps directly challenge each other on fundamental levels. These general clumps or groupings of shared aims and methods constitute the various philosophical traditions in philosophy. I am not sure how else to describe the nature of philosophy except by an imaginative analogy. Suppose there is a large tank that symbolizes the whole of philosophy in general. Within that tank are various groupings of materials, some larger, some smaller. These groupings represent shared aims and methods in philosophical inquiry. Throughout time, the boundaries of each group are gradually obscured and sometimes mesh with other groupings, sometimes forming new distinct boundaries with other groups, sometimes disappearing from existence, and sometimes new groupings emerge from empty space. The materials in the tank never exist as a complete solid object, but sometimes it might appear as though they are coming close, however, the materials always disperse and new groups continue to be formed.

This analogy has some significant limitations that must be noted. One cannot always be sure which materials in the tank actually belong there and which do not. This is due to the fact that nobody has the capability of viewing the contents of the tank from outside of the tank itself. Every time we attempt to examine the materials within the tank, we are necessarily also

examining them from the perspective of some materials within the tank. This is another way of illustrating what is meant when we say that meta-philosophy is done from within philosophy. It also illustrates the view that philosophical understanding is never *complete*—every understanding of philosophy must presuppose a philosophy by which we could form a perspective. Thus, there are as many understandings of philosophy as there are philosophies. There is no universal philosophical perspective, i.e., some perspective by which we could investigate and understand all philosophy in general.

Examples of work that may or may not be philosophical can be given, but we should always be mindful of the fact that we always evaluate a philosophical work from the standpoint of our own meta-philosophical perspective. For example, Jan Zwicky's *Lyric Philosophy* might be an example of a borderline case. The structure of her book is quite different from traditional philosophical academic formats. On the left side of each page Zwicky writes a few short paragraphs, sometimes only a sentence. On the right side of the page Zwicky presents, “a series of suggestions for further reading … the vocal score for a conceptual opera; a homage.”<sup>172</sup> These selections come in various forms: sometimes taken from dictionaries, etymologies, philosophers, poets, music, and pictures. One of the central goals of her book is to expand her thought beyond the limitations of analysis and systematic philosophy. Logical analysis, she says, limits our understanding of how philosophical thought functions.<sup>173</sup>

One might naively interpret Zwicky's project as an attempt to make the case that there are other modes of thought that are just as important as the method of analysis. Maybe it's just as important for us to write poems, sing songs, and appreciate operas. The interlocutor says, “So what you're saying is that other things are as important, for human beings, as truth.”<sup>174</sup> And Zwicky retorts, “Why call it truth if it isn't the most important thing there is?”<sup>175</sup> She aims to expand our notion of truth beyond the limitations of analytic and systematic philosophy. There are other doors of thought that can offer us philosophical insights beyond the limitations of analysis.

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<sup>172</sup> Zwicky, Jan. *Lyric Philosophy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press Inc., 1992. ix-x.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. 58.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid. 30.

Analytic philosophers have monopolized truth and limited it by what can be achieved through analysis. As Zwicky states, “‘logical dissection’ has the same effect on the meaning of a sentence that anatomical dissection has on the life of an organism.”<sup>176</sup> If analysis has rendered our philosophy less meaningful and less important, i.e., it has ‘killed the life’ of a sentence, then her question becomes pertinent: ‘why call it truth?’ For example, Ayer thought that the notion of truth referred only to propositions that could be empirically verified. Restricting notions of truth limits what philosophy is ultimately capable of. We should ponder, who decides what philosophy is ultimately capable of? Who decides the meaning of truth?

My initial thoughts were that lyric philosophy is a borderline case of philosophy somewhere between poetry and philosophy. One could explain lyric philosophy in terms of aims and methods. We might say that the aim of lyric philosophy is the same as philosophy generally—lyric philosophy seeks truth—but the methods are different, since lyric philosophy resembles poetry. Therefore, lyric philosophy is essentially poetry that aims at truth in some sense (maybe not the sense that analytic philosophers are interested in). However, this interpretation is not without concerns. Why should we suppose that lyric philosophy is a borderline case? Instead, why not broaden the border of philosophy? The challenge of lyric philosophy is not merely to present a vague case of philosophy, but instead, to fundamentally challenge our meta-philosophical conceptions of what philosophy is and where its boundaries lie. The problem is, there is no objective definition of philosophy, and so, consequently, lyric philosophy might not count as philosophy according to some, while others might consider it paradigmatic.

Philosophy in general is not a unified discipline. Instead, it’s essentially contested because its aims and methods are philosophical topics. Zwicky is a prime example of this, but there are many examples. This makes philosophy an elusive creature to try and understand. My own view is that the boundaries of philosophy are not objective. My reasoning for that is due to the fact that our aims and methods in philosophy can change, and I think that evidence of this can be given historically, by the various traditions of philosophy that exist today. For example, during the medieval ages and prior, philosophy was not clearly distinguished from science, and philosophy thought that it was doing science. After disciplinary speciation occurred, that is, the

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid. 16.

‘branching off’ of various scientific disciplines from philosophy, the identity of philosophy had to change. Questions about physics had effectively moved to its own department separate from philosophy, and philosophy now had to cope with the fact that these questions are now the primary subject matter of another science. That’s evidence that the identity of philosophy has changed.

Many have tried to model philosophy like the sciences. The Quineans, naturalists, logical positivists, Husserlian phenomenologists, Dummett, Williamson, and many others have all conceived philosophy as a scientific discipline. But I think a sharp distinction needs to be made between philosophy and science, and I’ve argued in this thesis that philosophy is not science nor does it make scientific progress. The current state of philosophy is divided, and it always has been. But since meta-philosophy is done within philosophy, it is within our capability to reconceive philosophy itself—it’s possible to change what philosophy is from the inside out.

### 3.5: A Creative Concept

‘What is philosophy?’ is one of the big questions of philosophy so we should not expect a decisive answer to it. Much of contemporary philosophy shies away from the big questions. But it’s the big questions that motivate philosophical inquiry and keep us interested. Let’s start with what we know. There are no universal aims and methods of philosophy. Philosophers can disagree about anything, including the nature of philosophy itself. Philosophy is not a scientific discipline, nor does it make scientific progress. It’s not a family resemblance concept either because it’s fundamentally divided, i.e., some sects or traditions of philosophy contradict the aims and methods of other sects or traditions of philosophy such that we cannot logically combine both groups within a single general concept of philosophy.<sup>177</sup>

There is a sense in which philosophy exists prior to any conception of it. One need not know what philosophy is, what its aims or its methods are, in order to do it. It is a natural capacity of human beings to question anything imaginable. That, I think, is the root of all inquiry in general, and it’s also, to my mind at least, the spirit of philosophy. Many philosophers think

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<sup>177</sup> For example, under one tradition of philosophy, the aim might be to discover new knowledge of the world, while the aim of a different tradition of philosophy denies that philosophy is capable of discovering new knowledge of the world. Williamson and Hacker are contemporary examples. Also, under one tradition of philosophy, the primary method of inquiry is methodological doubt, whereas other traditions of philosophy take methodological doubt to be a fundamentally mistaken method of inquiry.

that it is their task, in one way or another, to solve the problems of philosophy. The ways philosophers can go about doing that are myriad. But as noble and ambitious as philosophers are, the vast majority of philosophical projects have been a failure. Nevertheless, I think there is still an important and indispensable role that philosophy has always played, and it's the reason why philosophy simply won't go away. After all, if philosophy really is supposed to be a science, I think it would have gone extinct with alchemy a long time ago.

Philosophy illuminates all the problems of understanding and the gaps in human knowledge that have not yet been solved. It carries the beacon of inquiry; it motivates all projects that seek truth and knowledge.<sup>178</sup> Philosophy usually does not give us the solutions that we were looking for, but it does show us the problems that are important and worth thinking about. The fact that there exists topics that are not fully known, not completely understood, is what motivates the search for truth.

If I may, I'll help myself to a bit of Wittgenstein. In the *Tractatus* he made a distinction between what can be *said* and what can be *shown*. That distinction has never been completely clear to me, so I won't attempt to expound it now. What I can say is that perhaps we cannot definitively say what philosophy is, but nevertheless, it can be *shown* what philosophy is. I think the lesson we should take from this is not that we must pass over meta-philosophy in silence, because it is impossible to say anything meaningful, but that we must continue to engage in the discussion in order to show what philosophy is. It is the very act of asking questions and contemplating possibilities that constitutes the very existence of philosophy. It's not necessary that we must be able to answer the questions we ask, nor is it necessary for them to be answerable in principle, but only that we are capable of asking questions worth contemplating. That is all I had hoped to have done in this thesis is to challenge our conceptions of what philosophy is, and to present problems worth thinking about that could motivate inquiry. So there is a sense in which I should not have to say anything about what philosophy is, since actions speak louder than words. But that's not to say that I shouldn't say anything, since saying something is also an action.

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<sup>178</sup> At least it ought to. Some philosophy departments are quite dark: the beacon of inquiry can die out.

Philosophy is not a closed concept because it cannot be defined with necessary and sufficient conditions. Nor is philosophy a family resemblance concept because it is essentially contested and divided. According to Hacker, philosophy is in a constant process of change and evolution.<sup>179</sup> I think this much is true: it's not enough to look and see how the concept of philosophy is used in the language, because the use keeps changing. How should one understand philosophy then?

Philosophy is a creative or speculative concept. We can create the meaning of the concept of philosophy similar to the way an artist creates a painting. This is to say that we can create a new understanding of what philosophy *is* by reflecting on the aims and methods of philosophy, and in doing so, we can change the identity of philosophy itself. The creative aspect of philosophy is one that is overlooked by the modern standards of analysis. It's typically thought that analysis does not give us any new knowledge; it merely elucidates the concepts we already possess. But if philosophy is also a creative concept and process, then we should not be limited to deconstructing the notion, but also constructing it. I might try some speculative philosophy now, and assert that our understanding of philosophy is created and constructed by our capacities to question, imagine, reflect, and reason. Meta-philosophy is not a process of climbing and throwing away a ladder, but it's a continual process of building and reconstructing the ladder.

Philosophy is not something to be discovered lying around in the world; instead, it's something that human beings bring into the world by being what they are—curious and inventive. To say that philosophy is a creative concept is to say that we create our understanding of philosophy through what we do with our capabilities. If we want to know how it's possible to create philosophy and how it's possible to understand philosophy, we should need to know how it's possible for us to possess the capabilities we have, namely, questioning, imagining, reflecting, and reasoning. I think these questions are some of the greatest mysteries of being human, and they are the mysteries that motivate the quest for knowledge and truth. If we could answer these questions, philosophy and science would be both unified and complete, and it would signify the end of inquiry.

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<sup>179</sup> Glock, Hans-Johann. *What is Analytic Philosophy?* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 219.

My aim has never been to solve any philosophical problem—that's not to say that it shouldn't or couldn't be my aim. As I see it, my primary aim has been to illuminate the problems of meta-philosophy, the problems of philosophically understanding philosophy. It's through the process of illuminating the problems of philosophy that one comes to better understand the nature of philosophy. Meta-philosophy does not supply us with a definitive answer to the nature of philosophy, but rather, it's an invitation to contribute to our understanding of what philosophy is, and the future of philosophical thought.

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