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The armchair on trial

Philosophy, its aims and its methods

This year, I'd like the WFAP to explore some topics in Metaphilosophy. Metaphilosophy is a broad, heterogeneous field of inquiry that is concerned with various aspects of (surprise, surprise) philosophy.[1] Two central topics in this field are philosophy's **subject matter** and its **method(s)**. Discussion of the one often goes hand in hand with discussion of the other. For example, if one thinks philosophy is (or ought to be) about material entities, then one will likely think philosophy ought to be done with empirical methods. But if one thinks philosophy is (or ought to be) about, say, concepts, then one will likely think that conceptual analysis is the way to go. One's conception of philosophy's (proper) subject matter and of philosophy's (proper) method are intertwined. And these metaphilosophical commitments are, in turn, likely intertwined with other philosophical views one has[2].

A rough picture of the playing field

A crude and but helpful way of splitting up metaphilosophical positions is to distinguish between **naturalism** on the one hand and **"armchair philosophy"** on the other.[3] Armchair philosophers tend to believe that philosophy is in the business of doing conceptual analysis and that this is best done by consulting one's intuitions about hypothetical cases (read: thought experiments). All of this can be done to the satisfaction of the armchair philosopher from said armchair (hence the label). Philosophers that more or less fit in this category are: Ernest Sosa (2007), George Bealer (1996, 1998), John Bengson (2015), Elijah Chudnoff (2013), Timothy Williamson (2007, 2018), Janet Levin (2015), David Papineau (2014), Amie Thomasson (2017).

A third group of philosophers that I would also tentatively place upon the armchair are the conceptual engineers. They also think that philosophy is primarily in the business of dealing with concepts. However, they also see philosophical projects as ameliorating concepts towards some practical end - for example, changing the concepts of race and gender to help with liberatory political activism. Some texts we could dabble in here are: Blackburn (1999), Haslanger (2000), Cappelen (2018), Eklund (2017).

Naturalists, in contrasts, tend to believe that philosophy done from the armchair is unsatisfactory. One type of naturalism that may be familiar to some of you from discussions in epistemology is the view that philosophy ought to be about phenomena in the extra-mental world and that what we should be doing is investigating those phenomena with empirical methods. Concepts should not be the (main) subject matter of philosophy. Philosophers that hold views in this vein are, for example, Hillary Kornblith (2017), Alex Rosenberg (2014), Sebastian Lutz (2020) Ladyman et al. (2007).

Another cluster of positions that I've lumped together under the 'naturalism' label is the experimental philosophy movement ("X-Phi") that has emerged in the 21st century. It emerged in

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[1] There is dispute on the name "Metaphilosophy" and how to spell out a definition for it (cf. Joll 2010, Section 1.b). Some prefer the label "Philosophy of Philosophy" (e.g. Williamson 2007). I have used "Metaphilosophy" here for brevity, but I'm happy to cede ground on this aesthetic point.

[2] This sentiment is articulated by Rorty (1967, 38–39).

[3] This distinction is used in Haug (2018). Williamson (2007) draws the distinction differently; he distinguishes between "crude rationalists", "crude empiricists" (roughly the same group as Haug's naturalists) and "linguistic/conceptual philosophers". I am aware that this two-fold distinction is likely unhelpful for serious discussion of the various extant metaphilosophically positions, however, I do think it is helpful as an entry-point to the field.

the face of empirical data showing that intuitions held by armchair philosophers (about e.g. whether a subject has knowledge in a particular thought experiment) do not always match lay people's intuitions. The criticism of armchair philosophy is therefore that it is insufficiently open to or aware of the possibility of correction of conceptual analysis by results from empirical invesitgations. Different authors come to differenlty radical conclusions from this, but this is, in a nutshell, what X-Phi is about. Proponents of this view are Edouard Marchery (2017), Jonathan Weinberg, Jonathan Knobe (2017), Shaun Nichols (2007), among many others.

What am I proposing?

I propose we read into the debate outlined above, revolving around the question: to what extent can (good) philosophy be done from an armchair? To this end, I suggest we start by reading a handfull of texts by figures representing various positions on the field. Some texts I strongly I recommend we read are:

- Excerpts from Timothy Willaimson's 2007 book *The Philosophy of Philosophy*
    - I recommend we read the introduction and chapter 1 (total ca. 20 pages). If there is interest, perhaps also chapters 6 & 7 on thought experiments and evidence in philosophy.
- A series of short back-and-forth contributions (total ca. 10 pages) in Mathew Haug's 2014 collected volume *Philosophical Methodology: The Armchair or the Laboratory?* between Timothy Williamson and Alex Rosenberg:
    - Williamson: "What is naturalism?"
    - Rosenberg: "Why I am a naturalist"
    - Williamson: "The unclarity of naturalism"
    - Rosenberg: "Can naturalism save the humanities?"
- George Bealer (1998): "Intuition and the Autonomy of Philosophy"
- John Bengson (2015): "The Intellectual Given"
- Janet Levin (2015): "Reclaiming the Armchair"
- David Papineau (2014): "The poverty of conceptual analysis"
- Hillary Kornblith (2017) "A Naturalistic Methodology"
- Sebastian Lutz (2020) "Armchair philosophy naturalized"
- Chapters from Edouard Machery's 2017 book *Philosophy Within Its Proper Bounds*
    - For example ch.1 "The Method of Cases" and ch.2 "The Empirical Findings"
- Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols (2017) "Experimental Philosophy"
- Jonathan Weinberg et al. (2010): "Are Philosophers Expert Intuiters?"
- Elly Vintiadis (2020): Introduction to *Philosophy by Women: 22 Philosophers Reflect on Philosophy and Its Value*
- Kristie Dotson (2021): "Metaphilosophy: A What and A Why?"
- Valentina Bortolami (2021): "On the Metaphilosophical Implications of The Naturalism Question in Feminism"

If spending so much of our reading devoted to the conflicts between armchair philosophers and naturalists is not interesting to forum members, then I am more than happy to diversify our reading. Some ideas I have for this are broadening the above to include…

1. **History**

    We could approach the topic **historically** and read about metaphilosophical commitments had by various philosophers throughout history, for example, the Vienna Circle, (for a good overview of this, see Joll 2010; for an indepth account of the emergence of "analytic" philosophy, see Glock 2008). We could consider whether doing the history or the sociology is necessary for progress in "systematic" philosophy (e.g., by reading extracts from Kusch (2000), van Ackeren (2018) and Glock (2008)).

2. **Metaphilosophy from outside the "analytic" tradition**
   We could explore some pragmatist takes on metaphilosophical issue (e.g. William James, John Dewey, Richard Rorty, for more information, see, Joll (2010); Nicholas Rescher (2021)). We could read texts concerned with the distinction between "analytic" and "continental" philosophy (e.g. Levy 2003, Mizrahi and Dickinson 2021, texts from part III of D'Oro and Overgaard 2017).

3. **Discussions of what philosophy does for those doing it**
   We could explore views that try to define philosophy not by how it is done, but by what it does for the humans doing it (e.g. texts in part I of D'Oro and Overgaard (2017), see Joll (2010) for an overview).

4. **Reflections on philosophy, power and oppression**
   And last, but certainly not least, we can explore how our conceptions of philosophy are related to power and oppression (some ideas are reading Dotson 2021, Kukla 2024, Chew 2000, and more.) **I welcome reading recommendations from you on this last topic in particular!**

I am open to reading texts that are not explicitly about metaphilosophy, but that nonethless have important or interesting up-shorts for metaphilosophical questions. An example in this vein could be reading David Lewis' "Holes" to get an idea of how to investigate certain questions in metaphysics **If you have an idea of a text like this, don't hestitate to pitch it!**

Why care about this topic?

Here is a non-exhaustive list of reasons:

- self-reflective curiosity
- intellectual prudence
- anxieties over the contingent genealogy of one's own (meta)philosphical intuitions
- wanting a good answer when asked by relatives what one is doing with one's life
- wondering whether there is progress in philosophy
- wanting to understand where and why there is deep disagreement between different philosophical traditions

Possible Keynotes

Armchair philosophers:
- Timothy Williamson (Oxford, UK)
- Amie Thomasson (Dartmouth, USA)
- Hans-Johann Glock (University of Zürich, Switzerland)
- Max Kölbel (University of Vienna, Austria)

Advocates of Naturalism:
- Hillary Kornblith (UMass at Amhurst, USA)
- Alex Rosenberg (Duke, USA)

On Historiology and/or Sociology if Philosophy
- Martin Kusch (University of Vienna, Austria)

Perspectives beyond the "analytic" philosophy canon
- Kristie Dotson (University of Michigan, USA)
- Valentina Bortolami (University of Padua, Italy)

More ideas? Pitch them!

Resources

Accessible introductory material

Williamson, Timothy (2021) 'Philosophy and Common Sense'. YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3D8KKjyPOo.

Helpful collected works:

Rethinking Intuition (1998)
The Sociology of Philosophical Knowledge (2000)
Philosophical Methodology: The Armchair or the Laboratory? (2014)
Palgrave Handbook of Philosophical Methodology (2015)
The Cambridge Companion to Philosophical Methodology (2017)
Philosophy and the Historical Perspective (2018)
Philosophy by Women (2020)
The Routledge Handbook of Liberal Naturalism (2022)
The Routledge Handbook of Non-Ideal Theory (2024)
Methods in Analytic Philosophy: A Primer and Guide (2025)

Journals:

"Feminist Metaphilosophy" in *Verifiche* (2021)
Metaphilosophy

Books:

Timothy Williamson (2007), *The Philosophy of Philosophy*
Elijah Chudnoff (2013), *Intuition*
Edouard Machery (2017), *Philosophy Within Its Proper Bounds*
Hans-Johann Glock (2008), *What is Analytic Philosophy?*
James Ladyman et al. (2007), *Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized*

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