Philosophy or Auto-Anthropology?

Daniel C. Dennett – PhD, Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy. Tufts University. 419 Boston Ave, Medford, MA 02155, USA. e-mail: daniel.dennett@ tufts.edu

Timothy Williamson is mainly right, I think. He defends armchair philosophy as a variety of armchair science, like mathematics, or computer modeling in evolutionary theory, economics, statistics, and I agree that this is precisely what philosophy is, at its best: working out the assumptions and implications of any serious body of thought, helping everyone formulate the best questions to ask, and then leaving the empirical work to the other sciences. Philosophy – at its best – is to other inquiries roughly as theoretical physics is to experimental physics. You can do it in the armchair, but you need to know a lot about the phenomena with which the inquiry deals.

Keywords: armchair philosophy, method, auto-anthropology, metaphilosophy

Философия или Ауто-Антропология?

Дэниел Деннет – доктор философии, профессор. Университет Тафтса. 419 Boston Ave, Мэдфорд, Массачусетс, 02155, США. e-mail: daniel.dennett@ tufts.edu

Автор в целом согласен с позицией Т.Уильямсона. Уильямсон защищает кабинетную философию, ставя ее в один ряд с математикой, компьютерным моделированием в эволюционной теории, экономике и статистике. Автор согласен, что кабинетная философия связана с одним из лучших проявлений философии вообще – выявлением предпосылок и оценкой результатов тех или иных способов мышления. Философия помогает тем самым ставить правильные вопросы, не вмешиваясь при этом в эмпирические исследования, которыми занимаются конкретные науки. В этом смысле роль философии сопоставима с ролью теоретической физики по отношению к физике экспериментальной. Вы можете заниматься ею, сидя в кресле, но вы должны обладать достаточным знанием о феномене, который вы изучаете.

Ключевые слова: кабинетная философия, метод, ауто-антропология, метафилософия

Williamson acknowledges that "Armchair thinking is far from a 'pure' method," and goes on to make some important observations:

> The belief that philosophy should *never* rely on non-armchair methods is increasingly rare. Philosophers of perception often learn from experimental results in the psychology of perception; it would be foolish not to. Philosophers of space and time must take account of theories in physics, most obviously Einstein's special relativity. Of course, some philosophers insist that their interest is in our *experience* or *concepts* of space and time, not in physical space and time, but such attempts to avoid interaction with the natural and social sciences do not end well. Even if they can escape physics, how can they ignore the non-armchair work of experimental psychologists on human experience of time, or of linguists on the semantics of tense in different natural languages?

How can they indeed, but they often do. That is not philosophy at its best, but it still passes as good work in all too many quarters. He goes on: "In any case, contemporary metaphysicians are less interested in our experience or concepts of space and time than in the real nature of space and time themselves." His parade case is David Lewis:

> A clear and well-articulated philosophical theory may consist of a few general principles, as informative, simple, and elegant as they can consistently be. A philosopher may then argue for the theory by demonstrating its capacity to provide unifying explanations of many specific, apparently disparate matters. The leading analytic metaphysician of the late twentieth century, David Lewis, explicitly argued for his signature theories in just that way [Lewis, 1986].

Yes, David Lewis, my friend for four decades, was a master of the method, but I think these two assertions by Williamson can be easily misread as endorsing a blinkered approach that Lewis himself eschewed. They provide a near-perfect expression of the position I have called "*naïve* naïve axiomatic auto-anthropology" [Dennett, 2013]: thinking that the royal road to truth is to attempt to axiomatize, with your companions, your shared intuitions. I contrast it with *sophisticated* naïve axiomatic auto-anthropology, exemplified by Patrick Hayes' (1978) ambitious, if failed, efforts to axiomatize the naïve physics of liquids. The difference is this: sophisticated Hayes knew full well that naïve physics – the physics of the manifest image, approximately – is full of flaws (siphons and pipettes are impossible, no sailing upwind, 'centrifugal force',...), but still an intellectual structure worth getting clear about. Why bother? One good – philosophical – reason is to clarify the manifest image so that we can better execute Wilfrid Sellars' definition of philosophy's task, explaining "how things, in the broadest sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest sense of the term." Some of Lewis's work can be seen, in fact, to be a fine contribution to Judea Pearl's (2009) seminal work on causality, not because it succeeded in getting at the "real nature" of causation but because it gave Pearl, as an engineer/philosopher, something to fix.

If David Lewis and his many disciples thought that his methods, taken without deep knowledge of science, would yield "the real nature of space and time themselves," as Williamson put it, they were committing themselves to naïve naïve axiomatic auto-anthropology, using their own coterie as their "native informants" and taking their intuition-pumped consensus as a sure path to "the real nature" of whatever they were talking about. That this presumption has been common for decades is nicely presaged in Williamson's quotation from Austin. Right in the middle of his apologia for ordinary language philosophy Austin helps himself to a tell-tale word, "surely", which I have argued [Dennett, 2013] is such a reliable, if fallible, marker of the weak link in any persuasion that we should all, as scrupulous thinkers, inculcate the mental habit of interrupting our

train of thought with a "surely" alarm — *ding!* — whenever we encounter it. Austin may well have been right that his perspicuous and imaginative methods of examining ordinary language were better than the neologistic fantasies of some metaphysicians back then, but this passage misdirects our attention and our energies if it is read as a complacent assurance that the time-honored, well-honed home truths of the manifest image are the *last word* on anything.

I thank Williamson for drawing our attention to the wonderful passage from Russell, which describes a sort of feedback loop between ventured premises and encountered results. What we philosophers have learned in recent decades is that if our feedback loops are myopically constrained by our ignorance of advances in the other sciences, they are, at best, perceptive accounts of the lore of idiosyncratic tribes of ill-informed opinionators. That might be useful anthropological ground-clearing, a narrow investigation of a particular tiny subset of WEIRD subjects (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic – see [Henrich et al, 2010]), useful grist for the Sellarsian mill, along with the contributions of properly conducted x-phi. But it wouldn't be good philosophy.

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