Williamson on Laws and Progress in Philosophy*

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Williamson rejects the stereotype that there is progress in science but none in philosophy on the grounds (a) that it assumes that in science progress consists in the discovery of universal laws and (b) that this assumption is false, since in both science and philosophy progress consists at least sometimes in the development of better models. I argue that the assumption is false for a more general reason as well: that progress in both science and philosophy consists in the provision of better information about dependency structures.

Keywords: philosophical progress, scientific progress, laws, explanation, models, dependency, causation, grounding, necessitation

Уильямсон о законах и прогрессе в философии

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Уильямсон не согласен с мнением о том, что в философии, в отличие от науки, нет прогресса, по следующим причинам: а) оно основано на допущении о том, что прогресс в науке состоит в исследовании универсальных законов; б) это допущение ложно, потому что и в философии, и в науке прогресс также заключается в разработке лучших объяснительных моделей. В свою очередь, автор полагает, что это допущение является ложным по еще одной более общей причине: прогресс в науке и философии состоит в получении более точной информации о структурах зависимости.

Ключевые слова: философский прогресс, научный прогресс, законы, объяснение, модели, зависимость, причинность, основания, необходимость

"According to a common stereotype," Timothy Williamson writes (p. 24), "there is progress in natural science but not in philosophy." One should reject this stereotype, he says, because it

> … depends on an obsolete view of scientific progress as consisting in the discovery of universal laws. Philosophers have not discovered many of those, at least outside logic. But once we realize that much scientific progress consists in the development of better models, we should realize too that philosophy has also made much progress of just the same kind. (5)

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I agree with Williamson that one should reject the stereotype and indeed for the reason he gives. But I think one should reject it for a more general reason as well. My aim here is to set out this more general reason.[1]

We may begin with what is at first sight an unrelated issue: David Lewis's view on causal explanation (see Lewis 1986). As I understand it, Lewis's view has four main theses. The first thesis is that the world consists in or contains *causal histories*, vast systems of events standing in various causal relations. This thesis is intended to be an abstract metaphysical thesis, not tied to any particular theory of causation. The second thesis is that to explain an event is to provide some information about its position in this system; in addition, to explain a type of event is to provide information about the position of events of that type in the system.[2] The third thesis is that to provide information about causal histories is a special case of providing information about anything. When you provide information about a train system or a university, for example, you generally aim to maximize various virtues, such as truth, relevance, clarity, novelty, and reasonableness, and to minimize various vices, such as falsity and abstraction.[3] The same is true, Lewis thinks, when you provide information about causal histories. The fourth thesis is that, beyond the fact that causal explanations provide information about causal histories and conform to the general canons of information provision, there is no special form or content that they must have; Lewis puts this by saying that there is no 'unit of explanation.' What he mainly has in mind is Hempel's view that explanations must take the form of an argument among whose premises is a canonical statement of a universal law (see Hempel, 1965). Lewis accepts that causal explanations may on occasion be Hempelian; his point is that they need not be, and in particular need not be in order to be good explanations.

Lewis's view of explanation does not apply directly to the issue of philosophical progress; philosophers are not typically interested in the causal explanation of particular events or types of events. But it is possible to generalize the approach so that it does apply.

We may do this by taking advantage of a point emphasized by a number of contemporary philosophers: that causal histories are one example of a more general type of structure, which I will call here a 'dependency

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[1] For further discussion of this general reason, and of philosophical progress more generally, see [Stoljar, 2017]; see also [Williamson, 2018].

[2] As I understand him, Lewis intends (what I am here calling) the second thesis to provide necessary *and* sufficient conditions on what explaining an event is. The necessary part of this is controversial but I will ignore this issue here.

[3] The list in the text is taken from Lewis's paper. It is interesting question whether it captures the virtues and vices of providing information; compare [Williamson, 2007, chapter 8]. But I will not try to clarify this here.

structure.'[4] Another kind of dependency structure is a *constitutive hierarchy*, a vast system of facts standing in various synchronic relations of grounding or necessitation. The thesis of materialism, for example, entails that the world contains or is a constitutive hierarchy, since according to it every fact is grounded in, or necessitated by, some physical fact.

A version of Lewis's approach generalized to dependency structures may be formulated this way. The first thesis is that the world is or contains dependency structures, systems of causal relations among events or grounding or necessitation relations among facts. Once again we may advance this thesis as an abstract metaphysical thesis, not tied to any particular theory of grounding or necessitation. The second thesis is that to explain an item in a dependency structure is to provide information about the position of that item in the structure; *mutatis mutandis* for types of items. The third thesis is that providing information about dependency structures is a special case of providing information about anything. The fourth thesis is that there is no unit of explanation. We have seen what this amounts to in the causal case, namely, a rejection that explanation must be Hempelian. Something similar is true in the constitutive case. In order to provide information about the position of a fact or type of fact in a constitutive hierarchy, it is not necessary to provide a bridge law or an a priori entailment of the fact or facts in question. Once again, constitutive explanations may on occasion have these forms; but they need not, and need not in order to be good explanations.

Once Lewis's approach is generalized in this way, we may use it to state the mistake in the stereotype that there is progress in science but not in philosophy. In Williamson's formulation, the stereotype depends on two ideas: (a) that progress in science consists in the discovery of universal laws, and (b) that no such universal laws are discovered in philosophy, setting aside logic. Generalized Lewis, and indeed even Lewis's original account, tells us that (a) is false. Progress in science may in some cases involve the discovery of universal laws. But it does not in general consist of that. Rather it consists in the provision of information about dependency structures. Indeed, to link universal laws and progress in the way the stereotype does is to be in the grip of the very idea Lewis thinks is mistaken: the unit of explanation idea.

A friend of the stereotype might seek to defend it against this criticism by conceding that progress in science consists in the provision of information about dependency structures – and then denying that in philosophy we ever provide such information. But this denial is implausible. When the moral philosopher says that rightness in an action is at least partly constituted by the expected outcomes of that action, they are providing information about

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4   See [Bennett, 2017] and [Skow, 2016] in particular here. For background, see [Fine, 2000], [Schaffer, 2009] and [Rosen, 2010]; and for criticism see [Wilson, 2014].

dependency structures. So too is the philosopher of mind, who says that consciousness in a mental state is at least partly constituted by the subject of the state attending to its intentional object to a sufficient degree.

I said this criticism of the common stereotype about philosophy is more general than the one Williamson offers. I have two things in mind here. First, Williamson says that (a) is false because science sometimes consists in model building of the kind described by Michael Weisberg among others (see [Weisberg, 2013], see also [Williamson, 2017]). He goes on to point out that in philosophy we engage in model building as well. I don't disagree with this. But in the light of the picture I have been describing, we may see the idea about models as an instance of something more general: providing models that resemble target systems is one way of providing information about dependency structures.

Second, the criticism I have offered brings out that the stereotype about philosophy Williamson is responding to is similar to once-common stereotypes about other fields, and is mistaken in a similar way. In the 1950s and early 1960s, for example, there was a flourishing discussion in analytic philosophy about the nature of history (a good example is [Dray, 1964]). One strand in that literature might have been formulated Williamson-style as follows: "According to a common stereotype, there is progress in science but not in history: in science, progress consists in the discovery of universal laws, but no such laws are discovered in history." Lewis on causal explanation provides a good reason to reject this stereotype about history.[5] Historians *do* provide causal explanations and *do* make progress, even if they do not discover any laws of history. Lewis generalized provides a way to reject a similar stereotype in the case of philosophy.

I will end by responding to two objections, each of which concern the apparent limits of the idea that philosophy is concerned with dependency structures.

The first points out that constitutive hierarchies involve relations among facts, and according to many philosophical positions, no facts of the relevant sort exist. Expressivism about morality, for example, at least in its simplest version, denies that there are any moral facts; hence it denies that there are any moral facts that stand in dependency structures. How then could moral philosophy be concerned with such structures?

One reply draws on an idea Lewis emphasizes in his paper: that information can often take a negative form. If the simplest version of expressivism is correct, the whole truth about dependency structures involving moral facts may be provided quite easily, viz. there are no such structures. A different, compatible, reply is that, while (if the simplest

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[5]   Of course, Davidson's papers from the early sixties are the classic texts here; see essays 1 and 11 in [Davidson, 2001]. But Lewis's framework is somewhat easier to work with than Davidson's as far as the application to progress goes.

expressivism is true) there are no dependency structures involving moral facts, there are nevertheless related structures involving psychological facts – facts about us judging things to be right or wrong, for example. It is consistent with expressivism that moral philosophy is concerned with structures of this related type.

The second objection is that, while we are sometimes concerned in philosophy with dependency structures, this is not always true. Often we are interested, for example, not in what *grounds* moral rightness, but in what it *is*. If so, it is at best an exaggeration to say that philosophy concerns dependency structures.

My reply draws again on an idea Lewis emphasizes. Explanations for him are answers to 'why'-questions, and 'why'-questions are in turn requests for information about causal histories. If Lewis's approach is generalized, we may say instead that 'why'-questions are requests for information about dependency structures. From this point of view, this second objection is that, while philosophers are sometimes interested in 'why'-questions, they are just as often interested in 'what'-questions: what are moral facts, what is a conscious state, and so on.

Once we have the issue in this form, however, it is reasonably easy to see how we might meet it, at least in outline. For 'what'-questions are requests for information too: when we ask what something is, we are requesting certain sorts of information about it. If so, versions of the third and fourth theses mentioned above apply: providing information as an answer to a 'what'-question is likewise a special case of providing information in general, and here too we should reject the unit of explanation idea, or to put it more generally, the unit of information idea.

What does rejecting this idea amount to in the case of a 'what'-question in philosophy? Well, consider the question 'What is a conscious state?' If you accept there is a unit of explanation or information, you may well expect the answer to this question to come in a certain form, for example, in the form of a reductive definition of consciousness. If so, you are likely to be disappointed. You may even express your disappointment by adopting the pessimistic view that philosophy makes no progress. If you reject that idea, on the other hand, you may well expect the answer to this question to consist in good information about conscious states—information about their functional and rational roles, for example, or their intentional structure. If so you are likely *not* to be disappointed. It is in this way that the Lewis-inspired approach to explanation encourages an optimistic view about progress in philosophy.

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