

Williamson on the psychological view

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Abstract

What is the nature of the evidence provided by thinking about hypothetical cases, such as those presented in the thought experiments (TE)? Is it psychological, as those who speak about intuitions seem to think, or not? This problem is closely related to that of the nature of the subject matter of philosophy, that most philosophers tend to conceive as non-psychological.

Williamson's position on the matter (Williamson 2007) consists in rejecting the psychological view on intuitions: if we want this method—the armchair method—to provide us with evidence in favour or contra theses or theories concerning the non-psychological subject matter of our inquiry, then we must understand the evidence, collected “by thinking about the cases”, as non-psychological as well.

Unlike Williamson, Brown (Brown 2011) thinks that the psychological view on intuitions can be maintained: an indirect approach to the object of our inquiry is feasible; the gap between these data and the non-psychological object they are supposed to provide evidence for can be closed.

The main aim of this paper is to argue (against Williamson and with Brown) that a revision of the classical view on intuitions is not required. My strategy consists in adopting a Wittgensteinian perspective on the nature of the aims and results of the philosophical inquiry; in showing how this can help us provide an easy solution to the gap problem; and in arguing—against Williamson—that conceiving the subject matter of philosophy as conceptual does not necessarily amount to conceive it as psychological.

Keywords: intuitions, thought experiments, psychological view, conceptual analysis.

What is the nature of the evidence provided by thinking about hypothetical cases, such as those presented in the thought experiments (TE)? Is it psychological, as those who speak about intuitions seem to think, or not? This problem is closely related to that of the nature of the subject matter of philosophy, that most philosophers tend to conceive as non-psychological. Williamson's position on the matter consists in rejecting the psychological view on intuitions: if we want this method—the actual method, i.e. the armchair method—to provide us with evidence in favour or contra theses or theories concerning the non-

psychological subject matter of our inquiry, then we must understand the evidence, collected “by thinking about the cases”, as non-psychological as well.

In the next section, Williamson’s argument against the psychological view on intuitions and his rejection of the intuition-talk are examined.

In section 2, I object that, by arguing that the evidence must be conceived as non-psychological in order to make a certain kind of project plausible, Williamson is addressing the wrong problem: the problem does not consist in deciding how the evidence provided by the armchair methodology should be understood in order to avoid the sceptical challenge. On the contrary what we should ascertain is whether the data collected through assessing actual and hypothetical cases could in fact provide evidence for the relevant object of inquiry.

In section 3, an alternative solution to the gap problem is presented: it is Brown’s reliabilist proposal. Brown’s solution has the advantage of avoiding Williamson’s move. However, apart from proposing an analogy with the question of perceptual evidence and roughing in the reliabilist solution, Brown doesn’t explain how and whether this can work for the problem at issue.

Therefore, in section 4, I introduce a third proposal. This proposal maintains the most obvious and acknowledged view on intuitions, i.e., that intuitive judgements are the expression of what we would say about X in such and such circumstances (real or counterfactual) in the light of our linguistic or conceptual competence. In addition, the third solution conceives the request of a theory on X (i.e., the non-psychological object of the inquiry) as a demand for explicit norms for the use of the term “X”—for the application of the concept X.

Section 5 expounds the criticisms that Williamson advances in the seventh chapter of *The Philosophy of Philosophy* against the renegotiation of the nature of the aims and results of philosophical inquiry: Williamson believes that conceiving the object of the philosophical inquiry as conceptual amounts to conceiving it as psychological, and that a research on concepts cannot satisfy the expectations that philosophers have when they ask for a theory on X.

The last part of the paper consists in a defence of the third proposal from these two criticisms. In section 6, I present Wittgenstein’s position on the nature of the results of the philosophical inquiry. In section 7, I briefly illustrate how an inquiry starting from our intuitions can indeed lead to results satisfying philosophers’ expectations. Apropos, I suggest that two aspects should be taken into account: the structure of the method leading from intuitions to the theory (it’s reflective equilibrium method, a method that is both descriptive and revisionary) and the normative aspect of the intuitive judgements.

1. The argument in *The Philosophy of Philosophy*

In the seventh chapter of *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (2007), Williamson argues against a position that he dubs the *psychological view*. He takes it to be the mainstream stance on the nature of the verdicts expressed at the end of the thought experiments (TE) and, in general, of all the verdicts that philosophers treat as the evidential basis for their inquiries. His presentation of the view and argument against it can be briefly reconstructed as follows.

Many contemporary analytic philosophers

think that, in philosophy, ultimately our evidence consists only of intuitions (to use their term for the sake of argument). Under pressure, they take that to mean not that our evidence consists of the mainly non-psychological putative facts which are the contents of those intuitions, but that it consists of the psychological facts to the effect that we have intuitions with those contents, true or false. On such a view, our evidence in philosophy amounts only to psychological facts about ourselves (Williamson 2007: 235).

What philosophers are then supposed to do is

to infer to the philosophical theory that best explains the evidence. But since it is allowed that the philosophical questions are typically not psychological questions, the link between the philosophical theory of a non-psychological subject matter and the psychological evidence that is supposed to explain becomes problematic (Williamson 2007: 5).

In particular, as Williamson argues, the psychological view ends up encouraging scepticism, since “psychological evidence has no obvious bearing on many philosophical issues” (Williamson 2007: 234), which mainly concern non-psychological matters. This view, and the intuitions-talk altogether, should then be abandoned. Indeed, philosophers should recognize the non-psychological nature of the evidence they have access to: “our evidence in philosophy consists of facts, most of them non-psychological, to which we have appropriate epistemic access” (Williamson 2007: 241).

Let us take, for instance, the Gettier cases (GC) and the theory these cases are supposed to provide evidence against, i.e., the justified true belief (JTB) theory of knowledge. A genuine counterexample to the JTB theory of knowledge, Williamson argues, would be a case of a justified true belief without knowledge, not, as the tradition presents it, the fact that it seems to one that this is the case. This would in fact raise

the challenge of arguing from a psychological premise, that I believe or we are inclined to believe the Gettier proposition [the proposition that the Gettier subject has a non-knowledge justified true belief] to the epistemological conclusion, the Gettier proposition itself. The gap is not easily bridged (Williamson 2007: 211).

So the psychological proposition that it seems to one as if the subject in the GC has a non-knowledge justified true belief is not and cannot be a counterexample to the JTB theory of knowledge. What is rather needed, for the argument to work, is the fact itself: the fact that the subject does not know.

Therefore, Williamson concludes, if we want to keep the idea that TE can in fact provide us with evidence pro or contra certain generalizations, we have then to acknowledge that, thinking about the scenarios described in the TE, we have access to the relevant facts *themselves*.

2. An objection to Williamson’s move

Briefly, this is how Williamson’s argument can be summarized: given the fact that the subject matter of philosophy is non-psychological and that the way to investigate it is widely based on TE, how should we conceive the nature of the

evaluations we express at the end of TE? Not as psychological—we would in fact expose ourselves to the sceptical challenge—but as directly concerning the object of our inquiry.

This argument is straightforward, but nevertheless suspicious. One could in fact object that, by arguing that the evidence must be conceived as non-psychological in order to make a certain kind of project plausible, Williamson is addressing the wrong problem: the problem does not consist in deciding how the evidence provided by the armchair methodology should be understood in order to avoid the sceptical challenge. On the contrary, what we should ascertain is whether the data collected through thinking about actual and hypothetical cases could in fact provide evidence for the relevant object of inquiry. Namely, what we are trying to understand is whether the actual methodology is suitable for a certain kind of project, or not. We could end up answering yes, that given the nature of the evidence provided by thinking about what we would say in actual and counterfactual situations, one could in fact engage in that kind of project; or no, that one could not. If the latter was the case, we would have two choices: we could conclude that the methodology is inappropriate, and that philosophy, as it is pursued, is a hopeless enterprise; or we could conclude that the methodology is appropriate, but we have characterized the object of philosophical inquiry in the wrong way.

So the nature of the TE evaluations should be established *preliminarily*, rather than *a posteriori* as Williamson does, on the basis of a methodology, the current one, that he wants to keep hold, and on the basis of a certain way to characterize the non-psychological nature of the aims and results of philosophy, that he conceives as the only possible.

3. Brown's proposal

An attempt to avoid the move Williamson makes is that proposed by Brown in "Thought Experiments, Intuitions and Philosophical evidence" (2011). Brown agrees with Williamson on the two points we have just considered: the nature of the subject matter of philosophy and the characterization of its method. However, Brown denies that arguing in favour of the possibility for this method to provide evidence for the object, so conceived, forces us to review the classical position about the nature of the evidence provided by TE (and by armchair methodology in general): if the only problem with the classical view on intuitions were just its vulnerability to the sceptical challenge, then, in order to go on supporting it, it would be sufficient to find a good argument against the sceptics.

Let us see how Brown argues. First, she proposes an analogy with the question of the nature of perceptual evidence. Then, she examines the different strategies supporters of the psychological view for perception adopt against scepticism and consider their effectiveness for the matter at issue. We will not take into account the detailed report of the internalist solutions that Brown makes and the reasons she gives for rejecting them, but we will move directly to the approach she favours: reliabilism.

Pursuing the parallel between perception and intuition, she argues in this way: suppose that the method of forming beliefs about the external world—about the non-psychological facts of philosophy—on the basis of perceptual experiences—on the basis of psychological/intuited propositions—is reliable, then

beliefs formed in that way—perceiving or intuiting—are correct. But how can we establish if a certain belief-forming method is generally reliable? Usually, she answers, by evaluating whether the appropriate external relations hold. Here is an example:

suppose that, when one has the experience as of a large barking dog in front of one, one forms the belief that there is a large barking dog in front of one. On the externalist approach to justification, such as reliabilism, as long as the appropriate external relations hold, the beliefs so formed are justified (Brown 2011: 513).

Applying this remark to the case we are interested in—the GC—gives the following answer: suppose that, when one has the intuition that the subject in the GC does not know, one forms the belief that subject does not know. According to reliabilism, as long as the appropriate external relations hold, the beliefs so formed are justified. Therefore, in order to affirm (not just to suppose) that a belief-forming method is reliable and the particular belief so formed is correct, the challenge is to check whether the external relations, i.e., the relations in the world corresponding to those expressed by the majority of the beliefs formed by that beliefs-forming method, generally hold.

Unfortunately Brown does not go further: she does not explain neither how these relations are conceived, nor how one is supposed to check if they hold.

4. A third solution to the gap problem

In the following paragraph, I introduce a third solution to the gap problem, which is alternative to Williamson's and Brown's. At the beginning, however, I present this solution as an attempt to implement Brown's suggestion.

Let us go back to GC. The argument is traditionally presented in the following way: if the JTB theory of knowledge were true, it would follow that the subject in the GC would know that *p*, but it is clear, Gettier says, that he does not, or, better, it is clear that we would not say that he does. Here the idea is that, given the way we use "knowledge" (or given our concept of knowledge), this belief would not be called "knowledge" (would not be categorized as *knowledge*).

Let us then face the question at issue: what does entitle us to say that Gettier's conclusion is not wrong? How do we know that the judgement Gettier or, in general, epistemologists express at the end of the case is correct? One can answer that we can legitimately believe that the judgement they express is correct—can in fact provide evidence for the object under inquiry, where the object under inquiry is the norm governing the use of the word "knowledge" (or the norm governing the application of the concept *knowledge*) in our community—on the basis of their semantic (conceptual) competence, that is to say their ability to use the word "knowledge" (to apply the concept *knowledge*) in a manner that tends to reflect the way that word is used (that concept is applied) in the community.

So, let us generalize this proposal and see how it can be applied to Brown's suggestion: the particular judgement on *X* the philosopher expresses at the end of the TE is correct—it gives inquirer legitimate evidence about *X*, where *X* (the non-psychological object of our inquiry) is the norm that governs the use of

the term “X” in our community—under the *proviso* that the way the inquirer himself or herself forms judgements on X is generally reliable. But how do we know that the way the inquirer forms himself or herself judgements on X is generally reliable? Usually, by considering whether he or she is semantically (conceptually) competent, i.e., capable of using “X” in inferences that connect “X” with other words (that connect the concept *X* with other concepts) and able to apply the word “X” (the concept *X*) in correspondence to real and imaginary situations, in a way that tends to reflect the way that same word is used in the community. Hence, if the way he or she usually uses “X” actually matches the way the same word is used in the community—if these external relations hold—then we could say that he/she is competent. Furthermore, being the particular judgement he or she expresses at the end of the TE yielded by his or her competence, we can conclude that this judgement is correct. Namely, competence, the ability that guides one in everyday life, enabling one to be successful, is the same ability that guides one in the imaginary case.

At this point, two remarks are needed: the former concerns competence and the idea that the capacities involved in the evaluation of the cases described in the TE are ordinary capacities. The latter concerns the way in which the nature of the non-psychological object, the psychological data at our disposal are supposed to provide evidence for, can be conceived.

First, saying that the ability we use to evaluate a case like Gettier’s is an ordinary ability (such as competence), means recognizing—as Williamson does—that no special faculty is involved in the evaluation of TE. Under this respect my position is very closed to his. Williamson, however, would refuse to describe the ordinary capacity (or better, one of the ordinary capacities) involved in the evaluation of TE in terms of linguistic or conceptual competence: namely, all the first part of *The Philosophy of Philosophy* is devoted to argue against the idea that philosophy is committed with something peculiarly conceptual or linguistic.

Second, I see my solution as a development of Brown’s idea but in no way I mean to suggest that she would endorse it. I said that the judgement on X stated at the end of the TE is correct as long as a person is semantically/conceptually competent, i.e., capable to use the word “X” in a manner that tends to reflect the way the word is used in the community he or she belong to. But at this point, one could point out the following: this solution works under the assumption that what we are in fact looking for are the norms for the use of the word “X” (norms for the application of the concept *X*); but this maybe does not work under Williamson’s assumption, i.e., that what we are looking for are the necessary true propositions about the entity X. In other words, it is pretty clear—although not trivial—how competence can provide mostly reliable data about the object under investigation (e.g., knowledge) when the query of it is understood in terms of a query of rules for the usage of the term in question. By contrast, it is not clear how competence could provide any evidence if the object of our inquiry were substantial, were the entity itself, as Williamson puts it.

Later on I say more about how an inquiry starting from our competence is supposed to bring us to the norms for the use of “X”. On time being, it is important to remark that Brown would disagree with the way in which I tried to substantiate her proposal. She in fact believes, as Williamson does, that, when we ask “What is X?”, we are asking about the necessary truths about the *entity*

X. Brown does not mention the possibility to conceive the aims and results of philosophical inquiry differently than so. However Williamson does.

5. Williamson on the possibility to renegotiate the nature of the aims and results of the philosophical inquiry

In the seventh chapter of *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, Williamson asks himself: could a reinterpretation of the nature of the aims and results of the philosophical inquiry lead to an alternative resolution of the gap problem? Here is his answer:

Attempts have been made to close the gap by psychologizing the subject matter of philosophy. If we are investigating our own concepts, our application of them must be relevant evidence. But this proposal makes large sacrifice for small gains. As seen in early chapters, the subject matter of philosophy is not distinctive in any sense. Many epistemologists study knowledge, not just the ordinary concept of knowledge. Metaphysicians studying the nature of identity over time ask how things persist, not how we think or say they persist (Williamson 2007: 211).

This consideration is made in the wake of the criticisms to conceptual analysis Williamson made in the first part of *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. There he argued against the idea of philosophy as a conceptual inquiry on the basis of two points: (1) the incapacity to discriminate between allegedly conceptual questions and obviously non-conceptual ones, and (2) the non-viability of the notion of analytic truth, that he sees as the best explication of the notion of a conceptual truth. In the seventh chapter, however, the objection Williamson raises is different from (1) and (2).

Here the idea is that conceptual analysis is not viable because what philosophers are looking for, when they ask what knowledge, identity, reference, causation, etc. are, is something non-psychological. Conceptual analysts look rather for concepts, so, Williamson says, something mental and therefore uninteresting for the concerns of philosophy, when they are properly understood. This objection is different from (1) and (2) and can, therefore, be dealt with separately.

Hence, in what follows I am not going to take a stand against (1) and (2), but I am just going to argue against the specific problem he raises in this quotation.¹ So, against (3) the idea that conceiving the object of the philosophical inquiry as conceptual necessarily amounts to conceiving it as psychological.

6. Wittgenstein and Williamson on conceptual analysis

First of all, claiming that the aims and results of the philosophical inquiry are conceptual does not necessarily amount to saying that they are psychological: indeed, some rules are not. In particular, rules which are outlined and adjusted

¹ That said, the specific strategy I adopt against (3) has interesting consequences on (2) as well: namely, embracing the idea that the results of conceptual inquiry amount to norms/grammatical propositions means refusing the idea that a conceptual investigation amounts to the search for conceptual truths and that conceptual truths are to be identified with analytic truths.

on the basis of GC-like judgements (i.e., judgements stating what we would say in specific circumstances) are not.

At this point, a clarification of what I mean exactly by saying that philosophical theses/theories are (non-psychological) norms is in order. To explain it, I will follow the arguments proposed by Marconi in “Wittgenstein and Williamson on Conceptual Analysis” (2011). There, Wittgenstein’s view of philosophy as conceptual analysis and Williamson’s view of philosophy as substantial inquiry are compared.

From an historical point of view, the conception of philosophy as an activity devoted to the discovering of norms can be brought back to Wittgenstein and can be presented in the following way. Let us take—for instance—an uncontroversial result of epistemology as that expressed by **(a)** “Knowledge entails truth”, or by the equivalent: **(b)** “Propositions that are known are true”. Wittgenstein would refuse to describe these expressions as propositions stating necessary connections between entities (or properties?), i.e., the entity/the property Knowledge and the entity/the property Truth, as Williamson does; but he would neither present them in terms of propositions about the concept under inquiry, as Williamson thinks any friend of conceptual analysis would do. So, if **a** and **b** are not propositions stating necessary connections between entities (or properties), and neither propositions on concepts (i.e., conceptual truths), what are they?

In the perspective Wittgenstein defends, statements as **a** and **b** express rules/explicit instructions for the use of the words ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ (or, as he would also say, rules for the application of the concepts *knowledge* and *truth*); or better, rules that set connections among concepts/ among “X” and other words (among *X* and other concepts). Among, for instance, the notion of knowledge and the notion of truth; or, as in the case of the complete formulation of the JTB theory of knowledge, the notion of knowledge, on the one side, and that of belief, truth and justification, on the other. So, being norms, **a** and **b** could be formulated as “Call a proposition ‘a piece of knowledge’ only if you are prepared to call it a truth”, or “Only apply the concept of knowledge to contents to which you are prepared to apply the concept of truth”.

It is important to remark that what epistemologists discover, when they discover a rule of this kind, is nothing but a fact: they discover that, in the practices in which “know” and “truth” are used, speakers use these words in a way that leads them to conclude that they do not generally call a propositional content “knowledge” if they do not take it to be true. Like any other fact, this kind of fact can be found out, Wittgenstein says, by *observing* (or by *describing*) how in fact things go, and specifically how, as a matter of fact, we use the words “knowledge” and “truth”.

Let us not delve immediately into the problematic question of presenting the results of philosophical inquiry (i.e., norms) as the simple result of the description of semantic facts, and go back for one moment to Williamson’s argument: is it true that, in order to defend the armchair methodology of philosophy, we *must* reconsider the nature of the evidence obtained by thinking about the cases? The answer is no: rather than revising the classic idea on intuitive judgements, we could decide to renegotiate the nature of the aims and results of the philosophical inquiry. As I argued in the last section, this does not amount necessarily to a psychologization of the subject matter of philosophy. Further-

more, this solution (the third solution) is more viable than Williamson's, since it allows one to find an "easier" solution to the gap problem and does not require a revision of the most obvious and widely shared view on intuitive judgements, i.e., the view that sees them as the expression of what we would say/would think in a given situation. Namely, if the object of the philosophical inquiry are norms governing the use of "X" in the community, and if intuitive judgements are the expression of the competence, i.e., the capacity to use "X" in a manner that tends to reflect how the term is used in the community, then the appeal to them is justified.

7. Few final remarks

Obviously, saying that the third solution is preferable under the particular respect I have just outlined does not amount to saying that there are no problems to face. Indeed, this view has several well-known problems, especially in the "crude" version I provided before, i.e., a version in which it seems that only by observing and describing uses, something like a norm can be achieved.

For instance, a classic objection is the following: everyday linguistic behaviour includes errors and idiosyncratic uses; it is then difficult to say how, by observing and describing uses, or just by considering judgements that are descriptive of the way people use/would use a certain term "X", one could define a theory on X, i.e., a norm for the use of "X". What one obtains will be, eventually, a list of all the idiosyncrasies within the speakers' community. Furthermore, uses are often incoherent or inaccurate. So one can ask: how could they then be subsumed by a theory that, in order to be a theory, has to be consistent and accurate?

Finally, the idea that philosophical theses and theories are just the description of uses, or of judgements on uses, or, in a broader sense, the registration of the *received opinion* on X, seems to be plainly false. First of all, as Williamson points out, describing our uses or our intuitions is not what philosophers say they are doing when they investigate X: "many epistemologists study knowledge, not just the ordinary concept of knowledge. Metaphysicians studying the nature of identity over time ask how things persist, not how we think or say they persist" (Williamson 2007: 211). Moreover, describing what we say or think, or what we suppose is correct to say or think, is not what philosophers have done up to now: many (perhaps all) philosophical theories are corrective of our uses and competence. In particular, they are seen as—and in fact are—means to discriminate between what is really correct to say and what we just say or we just think is correct to say.

So, in order to make the third solution plausible, the question one has to answer is: how can an inquiry starting from judgements that are the product of one's competence lead to a theory that (i) has the characteristics a theory has to have in order to be a theory (consistency, accuracy) and that (ii) satisfies the expectations philosophers have on a theory on X, i.e., those expectations that are plausibly subsumed by claims as "we, philosophers, want a theory on X, not just on what we think or say that X is"?

The problems I have just mentioned go beyond the specific question raised in this paper. Therefore I will not discuss them in detail, but simply hint at two aspects I believe can play a central role in outlining a strategy for supporting

my view. The first one concerns the normative nature of intuitions. The second one the structure of the method which takes from the intuitions to the theory.

Let us start from the first aspect. Against the first battery of objections, one could insist on the fact that the evidence philosophers appeal to in order to build, support or attack theories is not directly usage, but the judgements of *competent* speakers. Moreover, these judgements do not consist in mere descriptions of the usage, or in previsions on how people would use the term in a given case, but in the description of what a competent speaker would take to be the *correct* usage. In other terms, intuitions are hypotheses of correctness, developed in the light of competence and reflection.

Let us then pass to the second aspect. Against the second battery of objections, one could point out the corrective and enhancing nature of the method leading from intuitions to the norm. Theories are not the results of a plain generalization from an initial set of intuitions. They are rather the result of an articulated reflective process, in which different theoretical hypotheses—obtained by inference to the best explanation (IBE) from the initial set of intuitions—are confronted with other intuitions which have not been taken into account before and which emerge from the reflection on factual or counter-factual (i.e., TE) cases. Usually, when a theory contradicts these intuitions, then the theory is modified or eventually abandoned. The same thing, however, can happen to intuitions. Namely, we may happen to find a certain theory especially persuasive and the way we normally would have judged the case changes: we start seeing things in the way the theory predicted.

In sum: the process taking the analyst from his or her intuitions to the norm can be ideally described as a procedure which, through IBE from an intuitive base and through corrections and improvements, aims to set a reflective equilibrium between the norm and the intuitions. Eventually, also other beliefs (for instance scientific ones) we think are relevant to the problem at issue can be used in this process.

However, if all this is true, then it is clear that the product of a process of this kind cannot be seen as the simple description of what we think or say about X, and neither as the simple description of what we believe is correct to say about X. The norm that we obtain is corrective and enhancing of what we think and say. In particular, it can be used to discriminate between what is correct and what we just thought or said was correct. And this—it can be argued—is enough to satisfy the expectations philosophers have when they ask for a theory on X, as opposed to a theory merely describing what we believe X to be.

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