WHAT DO PHILOSOPHERS KNOW?¹

Andrew MELNYK
University of Missouri

In his new book, Timothy Williamson makes a frontal assault on the questions of what philosophy is, what sort of knowledge it can attain, and what methods it can and should use. He follows no familiar party line, and indeed has something to offend everyone². In the book’s first part, comprising chapters one through four, he works toward the conclusion that philosophy, unlike, say, astronomy, has no special subject matter, and that, in particular, “few philosophical questions are conceptual questions in any distinctive sense, except when philosophers choose to ask questions about concepts” (Williamson 2007, 3). In the book’s second part, comprising chapters five through eight, he makes a start on a new epistemology of philosophy, one intended to vindicate the view that the knowledge achieved and methods used in philosophy are no different in kind from the knowledge achieved and methods used in everyday inquiry and in science. But he does not proceed, as perhaps one might have expected, by defending a thorough-going naturalism, according to which philosophy, being continuous with science, uses versions of scientific methods; he never has a good word for naturalism, and calls it “crude empiricism” (1-2). In an afterword, entitled “Must Do Better”, he urges philosophers to hold themselves to higher methodological standards and thus realize what he takes to be philosophy’s hitherto unrealized potential. (In the UK, “Must do better” used to be a stock phrase from end-of-term reports on the academic performance of schoolchildren.) The book ends with two formal appendices.

Williamson does not intend his book to be a systematic treatment of the issues that it addresses, and indeed it is not. But it is full of challenging, penetrating, and highly creative philosophy, and to read the book is to keep company with an outstanding intellect.³ It sets a new standard for philosophical inquiry


² I mean, of course, that ∀x (x is a person → ∃y(y is in Williamson’s book & y offends x))!

³ Caveat emptor! The book “is based on a series of articles in which earlier versions of the ideas were formulated, although hardly any pages have survived completely unchanged” (xiii).
into philosophy itself, and ought to elevate such inquiry from its present low
place to that of a specialty in its own right. It also contains material of general
philosophical interest, e.g., the third and fourth chapters in which the idea of
analytic or conceptual truths is subjected to an unusually searching and imagi-
native examination.

So I recommend the book highly. But I do have a reservation. I found reading
the book to be a work-out, and no doubt this was due in part to the originality
of Williamson’s thought and his fondness for formalism. But it was also in part
because the book too often fails to be sufficiently clear. In this regard the book
is a strange mixture. On the one hand, Williamson understands the importance
of clarity in philosophy, aims to achieve it, and often succeeds admirably, both
with and without the use of formalism. On the other hand, there is much that
is needlessly puzzling, often, though not always, because of what Williamson
has omitted to say. Chapter eight, discussed at some length below, provides an
extended example. For a briefer example, consider the following paragraph,
which I quote in its entirety:

In general, our capacity to evaluate counterfactuals recruits all our cognitive
capacities to evaluate sentences. A quick argument for this uses the assump-
tion that a counterfactual with a true antecedent has the same truth-value as
its consequent, for then any sentence \( A \) is logically equivalent to \( T \rightarrow A \),
where \( T \) is a trivial tautology; so any non-logical cognitive work needed to
evaluate \( A \) is also needed to evaluate the counterfactual \( T \rightarrow A \). [Irrelevant
footnote omitted.] For if we could evaluate that counterfactual without doing
the non-logical work, we could also evaluate \( A \) without doing it, by first
evaluating the counterfactual, then deriving its equivalence to \( A \) and finally
extending the evaluation of the former to the latter. Any logical work needed
to evaluate \( A \) will also be needed to evaluate \( T \rightarrow A \) when \( T \) is chosen to
be irrelevant to \( A \). (152)

The immediate conclusion of the “quick argument”, I think, is that, for any cog-
nitive capacity to evaluate sentences that we possess, there’s a counterfactual that
requires for its evaluation the exercise of that very capacity; this counterfactual’s
antecedent is a trivial tautology, its consequent a sentence that requires for its
evaluation the capacity in question. But what next? How are we meant to move
from here to the official conclusion, stated in the first sentence, that all our sen-
tence-evaluative sub-capacities are actually recruited by our capacity to evaluate
counterfactuals? We are not told. I assume the missing premise is that we can
in fact evaluate any counterfactual whose antecedent is a trivial tautology and
whose consequent is a sentence that we can already evaluate (e.g., “If it were the