PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS
AS EXERCISES IN CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Christian NIMTZ
University of Erlangen-Nürnberg

Summary
In this paper, I defend the viability and importance of conceptual analysis to philosophical inquiry. My argument proceeds in two steps. In a first step, I argue that we rely on the notions guiding how we do and would apply our terms in order to evaluate the counterfactual conditionals we find at the heart of philosophical thought experiments. In a second step, I argue that our notions determine what the relevant terms mean in our mouth. In order to defend the resulting neo-descriptivist semantics, I put forth an epistemic argument for descriptivism—the argument from communication. I conclude that philosophical thought experiments are exercises in conceptual analysis.

1. Thought experiments and the fate of armchair philosophy

Thought experiments¹ are widely acknowledged to be essential to our armchair ways of doing philosophy. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that philosophical thought experiments take centre stage in the current debate about the viability of armchair philosophy. (See, e.g., Jackson, this volume; Williamson 2007; Nimtz 2007 and the papers in DePaul & Ramsey 1998, Gendler & Hawthorne 2002, and Knobe & Nichols 2008.) In this paper, I defend an epistemology of philosophical thought-experimenting. What entitles us to hold true the counterfactuals on which philosophical thought experiments pivot is tacit semantic knowledge we possess, or so I argue. On the account here defended, philosophical thought-experimenting is a priori in the sense in which determining what our words mean by reflection on their application is an a priori exercise.

¹. This choice of label is not meant to imply that thought experiments literally are experiments, i.e. “controlled manipulations of events, designed to produce observations suited to confirm or disconfirm one or more rival theories or hypotheses” (Blackburn 1994, 131).
My argument combines two lines of thought. The first is epistemic and focuses on the evaluation of counterfactuals we find at the heart of philosophical thought experiments. Having argued that philosophical thought experiments are best understood as pivoting on counterfactual conditionals (§§ 2–3), I argue that these counterfactuals—which I call *philosophical counterfactuals*—are epistemically distinctive. In contrast to mundane or scientific counterfactuals, our entitlement to hold philosophical counterfactuals true does not derive from empirical evidence, or from empirical theory (§§ 4–5). The second line of thought is semantic and focuses on how the conditions tacitly guiding how we do and would apply our terms—I sum up these conditions as *notions*—shape the semantic properties our terms have in our mouths. Having argued that we, in all plausibility, evaluate philosophical counterfactuals drawing on our notions (§ 6), I propose and defend a neo-descriptivist semantics (§§ 7–8). I explain that the key contention of neo-descriptivism consists in the idea that notions determine semantic properties, and I put forth the *argument from communication* in order to support neo-descriptivism and reject the rival Kripkean externalism. Combining both lines of thought, I conclude that philosophical thought experiments are exercises in conceptual analysis (§ 9).

The account here presented runs counter to the ambitious rationalism espoused by Bealer (2000; 2002) or Katz (1998; 2002), who hold that we need *a priori* insight beyond mere semantic knowledge for philosophical thought-experimenting to work. It also puts me at variance with the armchair empiricism of Williamson (2007), who maintains that *a priori* knowledge plays no distinctive role in thought experiments. I won’t have much to say about ambitious rationalism. I will, however, take issue with Williamson’s armchair empiricism (see § 5).

2. *Thought experiments and counterfactual thinking*

Thought experiments are ubiquitous in philosophy. Paradigm examples include Davidson’s Swampman (Davidson 1987), Gettier cases (Gettier 1963; Lehrer 1965), Putnam’s Voyages to Twin Earth (Putnam 1975), and Jackson’s Mary case (Jackson 2004b). These thought experiments share some distinctive features. They all comprise a *narrative core*—a story inviting us to consider a possible situation where something happens, typically to some subject. In telltale fashion, Lehrer’s Gettier-style case begins thus: ‘Imagine the following. I see two men enter my office whom I know to