**Armchair Philosophy for Naturalists**

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1. Methodological Naturalism

I am a methodological naturalist about philosophy. I think philosophy is in the same business as science, aiming to establish synthetic theories about reality via a posteriori investigation.

What then is the difference between science and philosophy? For one, philosophy addresses more general questions. For another, it is needed when we’re in a theoretical *tangle* (this is why some philosophical issues are very specific, and some philosophy arises within science). For both these reasons, lack of observational data is often not the issue.

But doesn’t philosophy rest on intuitions? Think of all those thought experiments. This suggests that philosophy is concerned with the structure of concepts, and so uses a priori methods to deliver analytic conclusions.

We naturalists can query

(i) whether intuitions are really *important* in philosophy

(ii) if they are, whether they are *a priori*

(iii) if they are, whether they are *analytic*.

I’ll take these in reverse order.

2. Analytic Intuitions

Not many intuition-merchants say explicitly that they trade in *analytic* intuitions. But the Canberra planners do. They say philosophy starts with the *analysis of everyday ideas*—*free will*, *knowledge*, *belief*. Then it looks to “serious metaphysics” to identify the nature of what if anything these concepts refer to. The first stage is analytic, the second synthetic.

I am all for this programme. But I don’t see why the first stage is analytic. Canberra planners talk about the Ramsey sentences of folk theory, such as:

(1) (E!M)(M is caused by perceptions, guides action, has sentence-like structure).

This sentence raises philosophical questions all right—are there really such Ms and what’s their nature?—but it’s clearly synthetic.

To get something analytic, we need the corresponding Carnap sentence:

(2) If (E!M)(M is caused by perceptions, guides action, has sentence-like structure), then *belief* is that thing.

(This in effect defines the term “belief”.)

Still, this specification of what “belief” means raises no philosophical questions in itself. The Ramsey sentence (1) is the philosophically interesting one. (By way of comparison, consider *souls*. We all have the concept of a *soul—*some immaterial thing that survives death. But the concept itself doesn’t raise philosophical questions, as opposed to the Ramsey claim that there are such things.)

General moral. Concepts per se are philosophically insignificant, as opposed to the synthetic claims we make using them (*pace* “conceptual engineers”). (You might want to stop talking about souls, and do cognitive neuroscience instead. But it wasn’t the concept *soul* that was at fault—we’ve still got it—but only the synthetic things you said using it.)

3. A Priori Intuitions

A number of intuition-merchants distance themselves from the idea that philosophical intuitions deliver analytic knowledge, but at the same time wish to maintain that it is a priori (eg Jenkins, Sosa). This prompts the traditional question: how is *synthetic a priori* knowledge possible?

Timothy Williamson has argued that the traditional distinction between a priori and a posteriori knowledge breaks down in connection with philosophical intuitions. Still, then, how is *synthetic intuitive* knowledge possible in philosophy?

Experimental philosophy argues that philosophical intuition cannot generally be reliable for truth, given it is culturally variable. Williamson responds that maybe expert philosophical knowledge is reliable. Still, the traditional question remains—how is synthetic intuitive knowledge so much possible?

The idea of such knowledge isn’t contradictory. Many used to think that God gave us true synthetic intuitions. Many still think that our evolutionary history does the same. Still, even if evolution can account for some kinds of reliable knowledge, it seems unlikely that it can be the source of the kind of knowledge needed in philosophy. (Contra Williamson, the history of philosophy argues that philosophers’ intuitions are no more reliable than those of the folk.)

4. A Role for Intuitions

So—intuitions are either analytic and empty, or synthetic and unreliable. Many naturalist philosophers therefore conclude that philosophy should forget about them and turn to observational evidence instead.

But note that intuitions play an important role in science too. Galileo on free fall. Clearly scientific intuitions like Galileo’s aren’t analytic.

But how then can these intuitions be reliable? Indeed they aren’t always. (Tower argument vs Copernicus, Einstein vs QM.)

But perhaps intuitions about thought experiments play a different kind of role. They enable us to bring assumptions to the surface. Recall the idea that philosophy deals with theoretical tangles. Something is messing us up, but we’re not sure what. Thinking about imaginary cases can help us see what is driving our thinking.

On this conception, it’s only to be expected that intuitions will often be mistaken. We’re positively looking for ideas that are leading us astray. It’s still highly useful to identify them. Tower argument: bodies fall straight down. EPR: no superluminal coordination. Bringing these ideas to the surface was hugely important for Copernicanism and Bell’s inequality.

Similarly in philosophy. Prince and pauper: identity goes with memories. Mind-brain: zombies are possible. Even animalists and materialists will admit these thought experiments bring clarity to the issues

Perhaps experimental philosophy is a more systematic way of probing implicit assumptions that mere armchair introspection. But in many cases I’d say the old armchair method is good enough. In any case, note that either way intuitions should not be regarded as a source of evidence in philosophy. Rather we want to be clear about our intuitions to better to assess which elements in our thinking stand up to the tribunal of a posteriori evidence.

**The End**