

# FIGHTING CANCERS OF THE INTELLECT FROM HIS ARMCHAIR

-AN INTERVIEW WITH TIMOTHY WILLIAMSON

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*What was your first encounter with philosophy?*

I had a great-uncle who was a frustrated philosopher in the sense that he had to go into business at the age of about fifteen for family reasons. He adored both philosophy and psychology, so when I was a very young child he occasionally talked to me about things that touched on philosophical issues, although I didn't know the word 'philosophy' at the time. I only have faint memories of that now but I know it happened. I'm not suggesting that I have been into philosophy since the age of five but that was my first encounter with it. He was, although an amateur, a good enough philosopher to publish papers in *The Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*.

*You hold the prestigious Wykeham Chair of Logic at the University of Oxford with distinguished predecessors such as Alfred Ayer, Michal Dummett and David Wiggins. How do you place yourself and your work in the light of the overtly empiricist British philosophy?*

I don't think of myself as an empiricist although I'm aware that some people have the impression that my latest book—*The Philosophy of Philosophy*—is an empiricist work. Rather, I think of myself more in the tradition of Oxford realism, which goes back to a much earlier holder of the same chair—John Cook Wilson—who taught before the First World War. Wilson belonged to an Aristotelian tradition, and worked out an early form of hard-line realism

in which what is known is completely independent of the act of knowing it. Indeed, he had a kind of knowledge-first epistemology; he thought



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of knowledge as prior to belief. That tradition never totally died out, because among his pupils was H.A. Prichard who influenced J.L. Austin. You can see Wilson's ideas at work in both these philosophers. For instance, we have the tradition from Austin later known as disjunctivism<sup>1</sup> that appears in the works of J.M. Hinton, Paul Snowdon, Michael Martin and John McDowell. I think of what I have done—especially in *Knowledge and Its Limits*—as in that overall tradition.

*What are your main philosophical claims in your latest book, The Philosophy of Philosophy?*

*The Philosophy of Philosophy* is a defence of the armchair method of philosophy. People have often tried to defend the armchair method by internalizing the object of philosophical inquiry. They think that since philosophy is really investigating our own language or concepts, it is permitted to proceed by armchair methods. In the book I argue that there is no need to distort the nature of philosophical questions in order to defend the idea that they can be properly answered by armchair methods. An example of what I have in mind is a counterfactual conditional like, 'If it had been much warmer the ice would have melted'. We are not talking about our own mental states when we talk in such terms; we are talking about a world largely independent of us. Nevertheless, we can investigate such questions by thinking; we do not need to perform a further experiment by heating the ice. In many cases, we can successfully carry out philosophical thought-experiments because we can use the conceptual skills I was referring to earlier. Those skills have been acquired through a long process of experience, but no particular further investigation outside the armchair is required for the relevant applications of them and in that sense it is an armchair inquiry.

*So you think that armchair – rather than experimental methods - will play the central role in future philosophical research?*

There is no reason in principle or even in practice why experimental methods should be irrelevant to philosophical questions, but I don't expect them to become the central method of philosophical inquiry. It is the same in mathematics: In principle experimental results could be relevant to mathema-

tical questions, but the armchair method of proof is going to remain the main method of mathematical inquiry as far as we can predict.

*In a paper of yours — Philosophical 'Intuitions' and Scepticism about Judgement — you urge philosophers to stop using intuition-talk to disguise the unpleasant truth that all evidence is liable to philosophical contestation. Instead of appealing to mental states like intuitions you want philosophers to regard their evidence as judgements liable to ordinary epistemological constraints. In particular, you require the evidence to be known. What is the deeper philosophical point to this shift? How does this relate to the methodological challenges raised by experimental philosophers like Stephen Stich and Shaun Nichols against the epistemic role of intuitions and armchair methods in philosophical theory building?*

The concept of 'intuition' hinders philosophical self-understanding because much of what philosophers describe as intuitions are simply pieces of knowledge. An example is a professional philosopher I once heard saying that he had the intuition that he weighed more than three pounds. It is a misleading philosophical convention to describe that as intuition rather than perfectly ordinary factual knowledge.

But just making that point by itself is not an adequate answer to the experimental philosophers and the critics of armchair methods; one has to look in more detail at what they actually have to say. Much of their critique depends on a misunderstanding of what armchair philosophy is trying to achieve. I don't blame the critics, since that misunderstanding is shared by many defenders of armchair philosophy, but many objections are based on a picture of armchair philosophy as trying to investigate concepts in a kind of mythical raw state in which they exist in ordinary people. One upshot of this picture is that the critics regard the reactions to thought-experiments by people who have no training in doing thought-experiments as primary data. It is natural to do so since many practitioners of armchair philosophy have committed themselves to a picture like that; but the critique fails since doing thought-experiments requires a certain skill not unlike the skill lawyers acquire in learning how to apply laws to imaginary cases. These things are not easy to do; that one gets somewhat chaotic results from people with no philosophical training does not cast any serious doubt on the methods of armchair philosophy any more than it throws a legal

system into doubt if untrained people failed to diagnose hypothetical cases properly.

*So when the critics show that people's untrained intuitions about Gettier-cases vary with race, culture, gender, socio-economic status or what have you, their mistake is to treat those data as a decisive hit against the standard philosophical interpretation of such cases?*

I have often had the experience of explaining Gettier cases to people who initially did not understand what was going on and would either say that the subject was not justified or that the true belief was knowledge. You have to do some explaining simply to get people to focus on the relevant aspects of the example. At some point the penny drops and they suddenly see the point. You are not merely socializing people to give the expected answer; rather, you are teaching them to see something about the example they hadn't noticed.

*Another shift you urge us to make in philosophy is to diminish the now traditional emphasis on philosophy of language as the first philosophy. Are we past the linguistic turn?*

It depends on what you mean by 'linguistic turn', but we are definitely past the point when it was reasonable to think of philosophical questions as all questions about language or concepts. It is also clear that reflection on our language and concepts is not the only helpful method in philosophy. More direct reasoning about the non-linguistic, non-conceptual world is central to philosophical thinking. Much of that happens in metaphysics today. On the other hand, we have acquired a special kind of self-critical attitude through the linguistic turn, which (I hope) is a permanent piece of progress in philosophy. Even when we are not reflecting on our concepts or words, we are still formulating arguments. Often it is a matter of considerable delicacy whether the arguments are valid or not, because validity can depend on the hidden semantic structure of the premises and conclusion, which it is very easy to get confused about. Even though our interests are not primarily in language or concepts we have to reflect explicitly on the premises and conclusion as sentences in a natural or formal language in order to test whether they really do have the right structure for a relation of logical consequence to hold between them. It is analogous to the way in which an astronomer who is prima-

rily interested in the stars must nevertheless spend a lot of time carefully investigating the physics of the telescope.

*In your previous book—Knowledge and Its Limits—you make two crucial claims. First, that knowledge is a mental state. And next, that knowledge is a primitive or basic concept in our conceptual scheme that we should not expect a reductive analysis of. What motivates your stand on these issues and why are they philosophically important?*

There is a traditional picture of the mind that one can broadly call *internalist*, according to which one's mental states depend entirely on what is going on in one's head or internal phenomenology, independently of the external world. That picture has the problem of explaining how this purely internal world can manage to access anything outside it. Over the last thirty years it has become clear in various ways what a bad picture that is. The development known as *semantic externalism*, for instance, which goes back to Hilary Putnam, Tyler Burge, Gareth Evans and John McDowell, emphasizes the way in which the very content of our thought and speech depends constitutively on our relation to the external world. By emphasizing knowledge, a relation one can only have to contents that are true, as a central mental state I, have been arguing that the very attitudes we bear to those contents are constitutively dependent on the external world too.

This is connected to the unanalysability of knowledge because internalism about the mind implies that knowledge must be analysable into purely internal mental states and their external relations to the environment. Once we stop thinking of the mental that way we have no reason to expect the concept of knowledge to be analysable either. In fact, most concepts of philosophical interest are not further analysable as constituted out of more basic concepts: they *are* the basic concepts. My claim is that knowledge is in the same boat. I find the picture of the mind as fundamentally a relation of the subject to the world a much better starting point for thinking about many other philosophical problems, most obviously the issue of scepticism.

*Why do we need to attribute so-called prime mental states such as knowledge to people in order to explain their behaviour?*

A non-prime mental state is complex in the sense that it is a conjunction of a purely internal state with a state of the external environment. Internalists, in trying to explain how mental states can causally explain external actions, have thought that such an explanation would cite an internal mental state and a state of the external environment, the conjunction of which would do the explaining. Those composite states—the conjunctions—would play the central explanatory role. When you look at the explanation for long-term effects of mental states—not just what somebody will do at the next instant, but what they will do over the next day or ten years from now—very often they involve a matching between the internal state and the external environment. It does not matter exactly which internal state or what external environment it is provided that there is a suitable matching relation. For example, to find your way home you need to know which direction home is. That involves a matching between your beliefs about the directions and the location of your home. A pattern can be generalised from these cases. It turns out that explanations involving prime-, non-composite states are needed to give you the generality that good explanations require.

*So what you are saying is that cognitive science ought to employ prime states in order to provide the best psychological explanation of human behaviour?*

Yes. Of course, plenty of work in cognitive science already operates in those terms.

*One upshot of your externalist stand is that most, if not all, mental states are anti-luminous and thus not something of which we have immediate access to simply by having them. Some philosophers find that disturbing. Could you explain why we should accept this?*

To say that a mental state is luminous is to say that whenever you are in it you are in a position to know that you are in it. People have thought that, for instance, the state of being in pain must be luminous: Whenever you are in pain you are in a position to know that you are in pain. I argued that no interesting mental states are like that. The reason is that for just about any mental state, you can be in it at one time and not at another, while you enter or exit the mental state gradually. You can gradually come or cease to be in pain. The ar-

gument shows that around the boundary of such a state there will be cases in which you are in the mental state but too close to not being in it for your judgement to be sufficiently reliable to count as knowledge. Even what seems most familiar is in principle subject to this argument.

Epistemologists, decision theorists, and moral philosophers have tended to seek rules that are operational in the sense that you are always in a position to know whether you are complying with them or not. The argument against luminosity shows that there can't be any interesting rule of that kind since there must be cases where you violate the rule or comply with it without being in a position to know that you are so doing. The realization that any interesting rule at all will have this feature gives a new conception of the normative, since now all sorts of initially plausible rules previously rejected on the grounds that they are not operational can turn out to be appropriate after all.

*Armed with your equation of one's evidence with one's knowledge and the argument against luminosity your position seems to be well-equipped to face the challenge of epistemological scepticism, i.e. the claim that we are bound to know very little or nothing at all. Can you emphasize that point?*

One type of sceptical argument goes along the lines that for every ordinary situation we can be in there is a corresponding sceptical scenario in which things seem exactly the same way and we have exactly the same evidence as in the ordinary case, but in fact we are radically deceived because we are a brain in a vat rather than sitting here in front of a table. On my view one's evidence is simply everything one knows, so one's evidence is *not* the same in the ordinary situation and the sceptical scenario. In the ordinary situation I know that there is a table in front of me whereas I would not know that if I were a brain in a vat. That itself is a difference in evidence between the two situations.

Sceptical arguments form a complex group with all sorts of family resemblances between them; there is not only one type of sceptical argument. Sceptics are adept at moving around from one argument to another. If you try to pin them down on one argument they will jump to another and

then maybe back again later, which is why it is very difficult to finally refute their arguments. In principle the arguments must be treated separately, but they often turn out to be variations on a theme, so that the answers can also be variations on a theme.

*David Lewis once claimed that 'the rules of disputation sometimes give the wrong side a winning strategy. In particular, they favour the sceptic.' The lesson to be learnt, as he says, is that 'truth is one thing, winning disputations is another'.<sup>3</sup> Could you agree to that?*

Yes. If conversation should proceed on the basis of what all parties to it will accept, then the sceptic can remove any premise whatsoever that the anti-sceptic might want to use just by challenging it. That makes scepticism come very cheap. Those rules of dialectic are functional only within limits. Often a good test of a particular assumption is to cast it into doubt and see whether the evidence supports it when it is taken as an open hypothesis. But if you challenge too much simultaneously then a sufficient evidence base is no longer left to perform a usable test on anything. It is clear, on reflection, that when one applies these rules indiscriminately, they will be a poor basis for testing our beliefs; even though they are a good basis for testing beliefs when they are applied more discriminatingly.

*In one place you speak of scepticism as a cognitive disease diagnosed by its symptoms. You also claim that sceptical arguments in general take the advantage of psychological bias effects to prompt the intuition that one knows very little or nothing. Is there a chance we might find a remedy for such an awful diagnosis?*

As I said, sceptical arguments take different forms; what most have in common is taking patterns of reasoning that serve us well when applied with discrimination and applying them indiscriminately, with disastrous results. Scepticism is a kind of cancer of the intellect; it involves something growing unhealthily out of proportion. But one cannot just dismiss it with those phrases. One must examine the argument in detail and diagnose its specific problems. I offer preventive medicine: If you read my book before you become a sceptic, I hope that it will persuade you not to become one. If you have already become a devout

sceptic, nothing in my book will persuade you from your standpoint of complete neutrality as to whether you are sitting at a table and having a conversation with somebody else or are an isolated brain in a vat. Scepticism is a slippery pit; once you have fallen into it you cannot reason your way out. The thing is never to fall into it in the first place.

*The fact that the sceptic is unable to reason oneself out of scepticism seems to be tightly connected to an account of rationality suggested by your proposal that knowledge-norms govern beliefs and assertions. Could you say something more about those consequences for your conception of rationality?*

This is connected to the impossibility of fully operational rules. On my view, the rule governing assertion is not to assert that something is so unless you know that it is so. The corresponding rule for belief is similar because belief is like inner assertion, so one should not believe that it is so unless you know that it is so. These are highly non-operational rules, because it is often impossible to know whether you are adhering to them. You can be under the impression that you are asserting something you know when in fact you are not, just as you can be under the impression that your belief is a case of knowledge even when in fact it is not. For that reason people initially tend to be quite dissatisfied with these rules, understandably so. But any other rules will have the same property; sometimes you will violate them without being in a position to know that you are so doing. Once one appreciates that, one sees that we just have to make do with rules such that we are not always in a position to know whether we are adhering to them. All we can expect is that we quite often are in a position to know that we are adhering to them, and this we are.

*Could we not say something similar about the sceptic? I mean, maybe we could say that she is a knower—as the rest of us—who is just unable to know that she knows?*

As a matter of fact, all actual sceptics—maybe all humanly possible sceptics—know many things. Of course, few people seriously claim to be sceptics, but those who do know perfectly well where to go when they want to have a sleep. They may even know that they know that; they just have an additional false belief that they don't know.