18

Closing Reflections

Paul Boghossian

Is philosophy a distinctive discipline, with its own domain, and its own a priori methods for investigating it; or is it just a speculative, more abstract cousin of the empirical sciences?

When I entered Princeton's graduate program in 1978, following an undergraduate degree in physics, Richard Rorty was in the process of completing his provocative book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty 1979). In it, Rorty argued that philosophy, especially of the analytic variety, depended for its viability on certain distinctions—particularly between the analytic and the synthetic, and the a priori and the a posteriori—which it had been busy undermining, thereby, in his view, turning its ingenuity against itself.

Rorty found analytic philosophy's demise a cause for celebration but to a novice graduate student, about to commit to a lifetime of studying the subject, it was disconcerting, to say the least. And yet it seemed to me that Rorty was more or less right about the dependence he was claiming, at least when it came to philosophy's most foundational issues, such as the nature of existence, essence, value, truth, logic, modality, rationality, among others. I couldn't see, for example, how to make sense of the philosophy book I had most admired as an undergraduate, Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, as an exercise in post-Quinean philosophy.

The rationalist conception of philosophy to which I was drawn does not, of course, require that nothing counts as a philosophical issue if it has an empirical dimension. That would be absurdly restrictive. For one thing, and as we have seen repeatedly throughout this volume, empirical evidence may always enter, often in very rich ways, in fixing the subject matter of a question to be answered by a priori means. In addition, there are certainly topics of philosophical interest in which empirical evidence may be relevant in other ways. If you wish to give an account of the nature of color concepts as they are deployed in perception (as is attempted in Boghossian and Velleman 1989, 1991) you may need to know a great deal about the science of colors and of color perception. If you wish to give an account of the nature of the imagination and of its capacity to justify empirical beliefs, you may need to know a great deal about the psychology of the imagination. Indeed, sometimes you may need to reconsider whether a particular topic is purely a priori: space and time provide striking examples of topics that were thought to be purely a priori until developments

Debating the A Priori. Paul Boghossian and Timothy Williamson, Oxford University Press (2020).
© Paul Boghossian and Timothy Williamson.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198851707.001.0001

in physics forced a reconsideration. Rationalism about philosophy, then, isn't the view that philosophy *never* involves empirical evidence; it's rather the view that it needn't involve it; and that the most effective methods for studying its most foundational questions don't involve it.

Given these views, it came as something of a relief to discover that the distinctions that Quine and Rorty rejected could be saved from their critiques. One key moment involved the realization that philosophers had routinely conflated a dubious metaphysical notion of analyticity (truth in virtue of meaning) with a defensible epistemic notion (knowable to be true on the basis of grasp of meaning); and that the latter could be used, without invoking the former, to provide an account of at least some a priori knowledge. This was the view I first started exploring in 'Analyticity Reconsidered' (Boghossian 1996, reprinted here as Chapter 1) and that I pursued further in a number of subsequent papers.

One of these, 'Blind Reasoning' (2003a; Chapter 2) was slated for delivery at the Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association in Belfast in July 2003, with a reply by Timothy Williamson. In that paper, my strategy had been to assume the existence of constitutive understanding–assent links—in the form of a conceptual-role semantics for the logical constants—so as to explore their potential for explaining our entitlement to basic logical inferences, inferences to which we seem to be entitled despite our not possessing a non-circular warrant for them. For these purposes, great precision in the correct formulation of a conceptual-role semantics was not required; of much greater moment was the question of the existence of the appropriate epistemic bridge principles connecting understanding–assent links with positive epistemic standing. In his reply, Williamson chose to devote much of his attention not only to the details of formulating a conceptual-role semantics but also to raising an ingenious new objection to the very possibility of understanding–assent links, his now famous argument from expert dissent. While I continued to ignore issues of detailed formulation, it was important to defend the possibility of understanding–assent links against his objections, the result being a number of further exchanges on this score.

Over the years, I came to change my mind about some central issues independently of Williamson's arguments. One of them stemmed from a growing awareness that one type of understanding-based account of the a priori—precisely the type that relied on understanding–assent links—was unlikely to yield an *internalistically* acceptable account of a priori justification without supplementation; and a commitment to some type of internalism about epistemic justification seemed to me then, as it continues to seem to me now, non-optional.

Another stemmed from the growing realization that understanding-based accounts were unlikely to yield explanations for the full range of a priori justification, in particular, for our knowledge of normative principles. Both of these realizations help explain the evolution of my attitude over these years towards the notion of *intuition*, from a hesitant skepticism to a cautious embrace.

As these remarks illustrate, our exchanges on particular problems—already quite broad in themselves—interacted with even broader background commitments. These background commitments, while not directly under discussion, conditioned and

shaped our respective perceptions of the range of viable solutions to the problems which were.

Foremost among these background commitments concerns the conflict between externalism and internalism, most especially as it arises within epistemology, but also to some extent as it arises within meta-semantics. During the course of the debates, I was repeatedly struck by two points.

The first is the extent to which our divergent views on particular topics could be traced back to our divergent views about epistemic justification. Although Williamson occasionally professes open-mindedness on this issue, many of his arguments presuppose a broadly externalist, typically Reliabilist, conception of epistemic justification, a conception which I find impossible to accept. (To emphasize: what's at issue here is epistemic *justification*, not *knowledge*: it was common ground between us that, for the purposes of these exchanges, we would not presuppose a 'knowledge-first' epistemology.) For example, Williamson's central arguments against the importance of the a priori–a posteriori distinction will only seem plausible to someone with antecedent Reliabilist convictions.

The second point was how much *easier* many philosophical problems become on Reliabilist assumptions. What does justification have to do with truth, given that one can be justified in believing a false proposition? How does perception justify belief? How could the mere understanding of a proposition justify belief in that proposition? How could a mere intellectual impression justify belief in a general modalized proposition? All of these questions, and many others besides, which pose enormous challenges to internalists, become relatively easy on Reliabilist views.

Unfortunately, Reliabilism about epistemic justification is not plausible, and so this easy way out of those philosophical quandaries is blocked. As we can see from the intelligibility of skeptical scenarios in which you are surreptitiously envatted, the rational management of your beliefs is not, in the first instance, a matter of getting things right, much less a matter of getting them reliably right; it is about updating your beliefs in a way that is normatively appropriate, whether or not that results in true beliefs. A Reliabilist view of epistemic justification loses its subject matter just as fully as does a functionalist view of sensation: they both commit the mistake of conflating the normal effects of a property's instantiation with an account of that property's nature.

The externalism–internalism conflict in meta-semantics also plays an important background role in our debates. Williamson's social-externalist sympathies show up right at the start, in the debate in Belfast, in the form of his reliance on the claim that, by the sort of ordinary communal standards of competence exploited in a Burge-style thought experiment, it is sufficient for a subject to be competent in the use of a word 'C' for him to understand the concept *C*. Such a claim is clearly inhospitable to the conceptual-role semantics that I was presupposing in that symposium, a type of semantics that is much more appropriate for characterizing the understanding possessed by the experts to whom ordinary speakers defer (mastery), than for characterizing the understanding of ordinary speakers themselves.

Williamson's reliance on such weak communal standards of concept attribution continues through to the last of our exchanges, despite my insistence that I was talking about *mastery* of a concept, rather than mere *possession*. Williamson occasionally

raises questions about how that distinction is to be understood. But that is not much of a mystery. The distinction I am invoking is *presupposed* by the very thought experiments—namely, Burge's—on which Williamson's social externalism is based. Those thought experiments, in which subjects are said to possess a given concept *C* despite understanding it *incompletely*, or *misunderstanding* it, because they defer to communal experts, depend on the idea that the conceptual role associated with *C* by the experts is both complete and fully correct, whereas those of ordinary speakers needn't be.

Furthermore, although I acknowledge the strength of the considerations that lead some philosophers to want to espouse externalist meta-semantical views, I believe we are some distance from fully understanding the difficulties, indeed paradoxes, to which an externalist individuation of concepts gives rise, and so should avoid writing as though the matter has already been decisively settled in their favor (see Boghossian 1994b, 2011b, in preparation).

The one mistake that, as it seems to me, everyone needs to avoid is antecedent commitment to some big 'system' (Naturalism, for example) in advance of a detailed exploration of particular issues. Whilst it can be impressive to construct a systematic view that contains mutually cohering answers to many central questions, we are better off developing careful, nuanced accounts of particular domains. The 'systems first' approach inevitably leads to procrustean maneuvers in which we are forced to chop off crucial aspects of common sense—qualia, normativity, the a priori, or what have you—in order to make the phenomena fit our preconceived picture. In the great battle of philosophical styles, represented by the two giants, David Lewis and Saul Kripke, both of whom I was privileged to have as teachers in graduate school, I side firmly with Kripke.

At the end of the day, what we most need is to encourage the attitude of intellectual humility gestured at in our preface: that all these competing ideas, about philosophy, and within philosophy, are just so many research programs which, despite philosophy's long history, are still in their early stages and deserve to be explored in a spirit of open-mindedness.