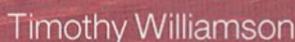

PHILOSOPHICAL METHOD

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

© Timothy Williamson 2020

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

First published in hardback as *Doing Philosophy* in 2018
First published as a Very Short Introduction in 2020

Impression: 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted
by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020935143

ISBN 978–0–19–881000–1

Printed in Great Britain by
Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport, Hampshire

Links to third party websites are provided by Oxford in good faith and
for information only. Oxford disclaims any responsibility for the materials
contained in any third party website referenced in this work.

Copyrighted material

Contents

Preface xv

List of illustrations xvii

1 Introduction 1

2 Starting from common sense 6

3 Disputing 18

4 Clarifying terms 32

5 Doing thought experiments 45

6 Comparing theories 59

7 Deducing 74

8 Using the history of philosophy 89

9 Using other fields 100

10 Model-building 114

11 Conclusion: the future of philosophy 127

References and further reading 129

Index 137

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

Preface

I owe many thanks to the people who have helped in the development of this book at various stages with their perceptive comments: Jennifer Nagel, Peter Momtchiloff, Andrea Keegan, and Jenny Nugée at Oxford University Press; the anonymous referees; above all, my wife Ana Mladenović Williamson.

In a few places, I have put more technical details of an idea in a display box. Some readers will find them helpful, but they can be skipped without breaking the flow of the main argument.

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

List of illustrations

1 Leopard and impalas **16**
Nature Picture Library/Alamy Stock Photo.

2 University masters in a disputation over the definition of happiness, with an audience of students, from a 13th-century Parisian copy of a commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* **25**
National Library of Sweden, MS Va 3.

3 C.E.M. Joad, philosopher as media celebrity, 1940s style **33**
ART Collection/Alamy Stock Photo.

4 David Chalmers' zombie twin is the one on the left **50**
James Duncan Davidson (CC BY-NC 2.0); Kues/Shutterstock.com

5 What best explains these? **71**
Anna Moskvina/Shutterstock.com

6 Turing's machine in 1944 **75**

7 Four pioneers of quantified modal logic: clockwise from top left, Avicenna (Ibn Sina, 980–1037); Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970); Saul Kripke (1940–); Ruth Barcan Marcus (1921–2012) **88**
Granger/REX/Shutterstock; Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA; by permission of The Ruth Barcan Marcus Family Trust; © Robert P. Matthews, Princeton University.

8 Colonial scene: Evans-Pritchard with Zande boys **104**
Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

9 The Müller-Lyer illusion **107**

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

Chapter 1
Introduction

Jean-Pierre Rives is a rugby union legend. Livewire captain of the great French team in the years 1978–84, he was an unforgettably dashing figure on the field with long, wild, blond hair and often a bloodstained shirt. In a newspaper interview, he explained his thinking about tactics. The key, he said, is to have a clear and distinct idea of what you are trying to achieve. Then you should break each complicated move down into its simplest components, make them intuitive, and build it back up from there. Without naming the iconic French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650), Rives was following both his signature emphasis on the need for clear and distinct ideas and one of his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (rule 5). French schools teach philosophy, and it has unexpected uses.

Philosophy also has dangers. Rives did not recommend another part of Descartes's method, his radical strategy of doubting whatever he could, including the whole world outside his mind, in order to rebuild science on the firm foundation of the few remaining certainties. Extreme doubt may not yield sporting success. Anyway, Descartes did not live up to his own high standards. He relied on dodgy old ways of thinking to 'prove' God's existence and then used God to resolve his doubts. Even at the time, many philosophers found his solution unconvincing. His reasons for doubt were like Frankenstein's monster, which he

Copyrighted material

constructed but could not control. That is the problem of scepticism. It's often dismissed as a non-issue, of interest only to paranoid philosophers. But don't forget the public relations consultants called in by politicians and businesses to undermine inconvenient scientific discoveries, like global warming and the harmful effects of smoking. Those consultants have a slogan: "Our product is doubt". They know they can't prove the scientists wrong. Their aim is just to create enough confusion, to make people think "The experts can't agree, so there's no point worrying". Climate change scepticism isn't a harmless philosophical eccentricity; it's a threat to future generations.

Descartes's starting point for reconstructing knowledge was his knowledge of his own inner thought. That too still has strange echoes. In March 2003 the United States under President George W. Bush and the United Kingdom under Prime Minister Tony Blair invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam Hussein's regime, claiming that it had weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The claim soon turned out to be false. In a 2004 speech defending his actions, Tony Blair said: "I only know what I believe". He hadn't known that there were WMD, but he had known that *he believed that* there were WMD. He tried to divert attention away from the question of testable evidence out there for WMD to the question of his inner sincerity.

Philosophy also plays a role when we recognize that the people of that region have endured a long history of human rights abuses. We can do so because we have an idea of human rights. Philosophers played a key role in developing that idea: notably, in the same period as Descartes, Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), John Locke (1632–1704), and others.

Philosophy isn't something totally alien to us; it's there already in our lives, in trivial ways and important ones. But what *is* philosophy? What are philosophers trying to achieve?

Copyrighted material

Traditionally, philosophers have wanted to understand the nature of *everything*, in a very general way: existence and non-existence, possibility and necessity; the world of common sense, the world of natural science, the world of mathematics; parts and wholes, space and time, cause and effect, mind and matter. They want to understand our understanding itself: knowledge and ignorance, belief and doubt, appearance and reality, truth and falsity, thought and language, reason and emotion. They want to understand and judge what we do with that understanding: action and intention, means and ends, good and bad, right and wrong, fact and value, pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness, life and death, and more. Philosophy is hyper-ambitious.

That brief description raises an obvious question: since scientists study many of those topics, how is philosophy related to science? They were not always separate. From the ancient Greeks on, philosophy included *natural philosophy*, the study of the natural world. To cut a long story short, through the 16th and 17th centuries, natural philosophy turned into something recognizable as natural science in the modern sense, especially physics. Pioneers such as Galileo and Newton still described themselves as natural philosophers. Some philosophers were also scientists and mathematicians, including Descartes and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716). But natural philosophy or natural science developed a distinctive methodology, with a key role for experimentation, exact observation using special instruments such as telescopes and microscopes, measurement, and calculation. Increasingly, this child of philosophy has looked like a rival and mortal threat to its parent. For philosophy and natural science seem to be in competition to answer the same questions about the underlying nature of reality. If it is a duel, philosophy seems to be outgunned, for it only has thought, while natural science has those other methods too. If philosophers insist that they are better at thinking than natural scientists, who will believe them? To change the metaphor, the philosopher is cast in the role of the lazy man

Copyrighted material