



Précis of philosophy within its proper bounds

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Philosophy Within Its Proper Bounds (Machery 2017) contributes to the lively metaphilosophical discussion of the methods of philosophy that emerged as a central concern in contemporary philosophy fifteen years ago, in large part because of the growth of experimental philosophy, at the time a new approach to philosophy whose methods were starkly different with the tools then used by nearly all philosophers. Following the tracks laid 40 years ago by Steve Stich (Stich 1990), leading experimental philosophers thought that some of their results challenged some of ways analytic philosophers got about addressing philosophical questions. However, this challenge had yet to be made explicit in sufficient detail and with sufficient care. *Philosophy Within Its Proper Bounds* aims at articulating the reasons why experimental philosophers' findings are so significant from a metaphilosophical point of view: They imply that the main tool for learning about metaphysical necessities and what I call strict metaphysical possibilities (possibilities that are nomologically impossible) cannot be trusted and that if the other tools are also deficient (as I argue as well) the important, century-old philosophical issues that depend on metaphysical necessities and strict metaphysical possibilities cannot be solved and, I argue, should be set aside. The mind–body problem, the definition of knowledge and causation, the identification of metaphysical conditions for free will and responsibility are among those issues. Fortunately, there is much left to do for philosophers, since many of the traditional formulations of these philosophical issues have counterparts that do not hang on gaining such metaphysical knowledge. In addition, *Philosophy Within Its Proper Bounds* defends a naturalized form of conceptual analysis with either descriptive or prescriptive goals (the latter being also called “conceptual engineering”).

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Chapter 1 (“The Method of Cases”) introduces the main tool for learning about metaphysical necessities and strict metaphysical possibilities: the method of cases. Cases are just short stories describing possible or actual situations. Philosophical cases are just cases used for philosophical purposes. Cases are used in many different ways in philosophy, most of which are innocuous. Chapter 1 focuses on the use of cases for argumentative purposes: The facts we take to hold in the situations described by the cases are part of philosophical arguments. I refer to this use of cases as the method of cases. Surprisingly, there is no consensus about what it is philosophers do when they use cases for argumentative purposes. Chapter 1 defends an anti-exceptionalist position about the mental states elicited by cases in philosophy and about the processes leading to these mental states: Cases elicit everyday judgments that have no distinctive semantic, epistemological, or phenomenological properties. They are not intuitions, they are not a priori, and they are not analytic. Forming a judgment about a case is similar to what we do when we form a judgment about the moral status of the president’s action or whether the president caused some outcome on the basis of a newspaper’s article. And whatever justification they might have is on a par with the justification everyday judgments elicited by texts have.

Chapter 2 (“The Empirical Findings”) is the first systematic review of the experimental philosophy literature that shows that judgments elicited by philosophical cases (in short “case judgments”) are influenced by trivial variations of these cases (“presentation effects”) or vary among demographic groups such as cultures (“demographic effects”). The well-known findings of Machery et al. (2004) illustrate the second type of effects: The Gödel case seems to elicit different judgments among Americans and Chinese.

Chapter 3 (“Fooled by Cognitive Artifacts”) provides the first argument against the method of cases: Unreliability. I defend the focus on reliability rather than some other epistemically relevant properties such as hopefulness, calibration, and sensitivity to normatively inappropriate influences. I argue that the case judgments that have been examined by experimental philosophers are unreliable because, as a result of demographic and presentation effects, a majority gives one answer and a sizeable minority the opposite answer. I propose that this unreliability generalizes to all the philosophical cases that possess some disturbing properties: they are unusual; they separate the properties that instances of concepts usually have; their target content (the facts of the situation that matter philosophically) and their superficial content are entangled.

Chapter 4 (“Enshrining *Our* Prejudices”) presents a dilemma against the method of cases based on the demographic effects: If demographic effects indicate that lay people genuinely disagree with philosophers, then philosophers should suspend judgment because the disagreement happens between epistemic peers and because, for that specific situation, all theories of peer disagreement converge on the same conclusion (“Dogmatism”). By contrast, if demographic effects indicate that lay people merely seem to disagree—their disagreement is purely verbal—then philosophers need to justify why what they are usually philosophizing about—the philosophically familiar—is worth theorizing about (“Parochialism”). Both horns

of the dilemma lead to the same conclusion: Philosophers ought to suspend judgment in response to philosophical cases.

Chapter 5 (“Eight Defenses of the Method of Cases”) examines eight different ways of undermining experimental philosophers’ attack against the method of cases. Of particular interest is the unjustified and empirically undermined idea that philosophers are expert at judging what facts hold in the situations described by philosophical cases. In addition, I argue against the argument that any skepticism based on demographic and presentation effects would generalize unacceptably to all judgments.

Chapter 6 (“Modal Ignorance and the Limits of Philosophy”) argues that if there is no other way of learning about metaphysical necessities and strict metaphysical possibilities, then a moderate form of modal skepticism is justified: Some of the most important modal truths needed to answer long-standing philosophical questions would be beyond our epistemic reach. If that is true, these philosophical questions should be set aside, and philosophical inquiry should be reoriented toward problems that can be genuinely addressed, including counterparts of the problems beyond our epistemic reach. Finally, I argue for the truth of the antecedent, with a specific focus on the role of theoretical virtues in philosophical inquiry.

Chapter 7 (“Conceptual Analysis Rebooted”) argues for a specific redirection of philosophical activity: the empirical analysis of concepts of philosophical interest. This descriptive project is often closely connected with a normative project: prescriptive conceptual analysis, recently called “conceptual engineering.”

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