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Wittgenstein and Williamson on Conceptual Analysis

Diego Marconi

Tim Williamson has been criticised by some readers, such as P.M.S. Hacker (2009) and H.J. Glock (2010), for not spelling out what he means by ‘conceptual analysis’ or ‘conceptual investigation’ - what he takes philosophy *not* to be. This doesn’t seem entirely fair: Williamson does say that a conceptual investigation is a study of concepts -e.g. of the concept of knowledge, as opposed to knowledge itself- and he gives examples of philosophical investigations that he regards as conceptual, such as research in philosophy of science about ‘what biologists’ and physicists’ concepts are or should be’, or ‘what those concepts are concepts of’ (*PoP*, p.18). I take it that he would also regard Chris Peacocke’s, Jerry Fodor’s, and Jesse Prinz’s work on what concepts (in general) are as examples of conceptual investigations in the same sense. On the other hand, it is true that Williamson doesn’t do much to clarify the *prima facie* different sense of ‘conceptual analysis’ in which much of philosophy could be considered (and was indeed considered, and is still considered by many) to be conceptual analysis: e.g. what did the linguistic/conceptual philosophers have in mind when they claimed that all or most philosophical investigations are conceptual investigations. More accurately: Williamson assumes that for such philosophers, philosophy was (is) the search for conceptual truths; he then quickly identifies conceptual truth with analytic truth (*PoP*, p.50), and proceeds to challenge both the thesis that allegedly analytic truths are insubstantial and the very notion of analytic truth. From a theoretical viewpoint, Williamson’s polemical target is sufficiently well defined; but from a historical viewpoint it is somewhat out of focus. The idea that philosophy is an attempt at establishing analytic truths -truths such as are expressed by ‘Rectangles have four sides’ or ‘Groundhogs are woodchucks’ - is not easily reconciled with our picture of what Wittgenstein, Ryle, or Strawson were up to. Of course, Williamson could retort that those philosophers *professed* to be doing conceptual analysis but really were not. However, such a claim ought to be substantiated by some alternative description of their work, which Williamson’s book clearly does not aim to provide.

In what follows, I shall try to describe one view of philosophy as conceptual inquiry (namely Wittgenstein’s, as I happen to know it better than

other similar views) and to point out differences between such a conception of philosophy and the conception defended by Williamson in *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. I shall argue for the following three claims:

1. Wittgenstein's view that philosophical investigations are conceptual investigations derives from his conception of necessity;
2. Williamson does not argue against Wittgenstein's conception of necessity: he simply takes it for granted that it is misguided;
3. Williamson's arguments against the thesis that philosophy is conceptual analysis do not have much bite against Wittgenstein's conception.

For lack of space, I shall not try to show that Williamson's arguments do not *apply* to Wittgenstein's conception. I refer the reader to the literature that has tried to show that Wittgenstein's grammatical 'propositions' are not to be identified with the analytic propositions (e.g. Baker & Hacker 1985; Andronico 2007), even though it has been argued that the two sets have a non-empty intersection (Schroeder 2009, 102-105). Be that as it may, it remains that Williamson's arguments are not directly aimed at the core of Wittgenstein's conception. Briefly put: if Wittgenstein is right about necessity, it is hard to see how philosophy could be other than conceptual analysis (in Wittgenstein's sense, which is not exactly Williamson's). Williamson does not argue against Wittgenstein's conception of necessity but simply assumes it to be wrong. Consequently, on the one hand, the view that Williamson refutes (if he does refute it) is not exactly Wittgenstein's view; on the other hand, Williamson does not challenge Wittgenstein's arguments for his conception of philosophy, as he does not deal with them at all.

For Wittgenstein, conceptual inquiry does *not* lead to conceptual truths, i.e. to true propositions about concepts; it leads to the discovery of rules that set connections among concepts. Such connections are called 'grammatical' because the rules that establish them are similar to rules of grammar, such as 'Medial verbs do not allow manner adverbials' or 'The passivization marker is SV-internal'. An example of such grammatical connections is the connection between the notion of knowledge and the notion of truth that we express by saying such things as 'Knowledge entails truth', or 'Propositions that are known are true' (*OC*, 415). Wittgenstein, however, regards these common formulations as misleading, for they present as descriptions of facts what are in fact rules for the use of language. 'Propositions that are known are true' looks like 'In macaques, mirror neurons are found in the pre-frontal cortex'. However, while some mirror neurons, or even all mirror neurons might not be in

the macaques' prefrontal cortex, a proposition that is known could not fail to be true. Truly factual propositions are singled out by their contingency: that a proposition is not factual, i.e. -for Wittgenstein- that it is not a genuine proposition can be seen from the fact that, if it were a proposition, it would turn out to be a necessary proposition - a proposition that could not be false. However, there are no necessary propositions: if a proposition were necessary, its negation would describe an impossibility. But impossibilities cannot be meaningfully described, hence necessities cannot be meaningfully described either (if p , a proposition that describes a necessity, were meaningful then $\sim p$, the description of an impossibility, would be meaningful as well).¹

Thus, 'propositions' such as 'Propositions that are known are true' are quite different from 'Mirror neurons are found in the macaques' pre-frontal cortex'; in fact, they are not propositions at all. Rather, they are misleading formulations of rules; in this case, of one of the rules that govern our use of the words 'knowledge' and 'truth' (or, as Wittgenstein would also say, our application of the concepts of knowledge and truth): rules such as 'Call a proposition 'a piece of knowledge' only if you are prepared to call it a truth', or 'Only apply the concept of knowledge to contents to which you are prepared to apply the concept of truth'.

Such results of philosophical inquiry can be presented as *norms* for the use of concepts. However, this could suggest that philosophical inquiry discovers norms in the sense in which we might come to establish (discover) that one ought not to kill, or that one ought to nurse the old rather than suppress them. This is not what Wittgenstein had in mind: Wittgenstein did not think that we come to establish that knowledge entails truth by way of some valid argument based on true premises. What we discover is a fact: we discover *that some norm is in force* within a certain community (usually, our own community). It then seems that philosophy is a kind of anthropology: indeed, Wittgenstein himself pointed out the analogy (e.g. *BT*, XII, 90, *VB*, 75). Philosophy makes us aware of the norms that regulate certain practices of our community: in this sense it is a kind of anthropology. However, this is just one side of philosophical inquiry. The other side is highlighted when we come to consider that the community we are talking about is *our own* community, so that

¹ The argument can be reconstructed from bits and pieces in the *Tractatus* (see Marconi 2010). The later Wittgenstein stuck with the idea that if it is inconceivable that $\sim p$, then it is inconceivable that p as well (*PI*, 251), though he admitted that we have an inclination to regard alleged *a priori* truths ('This body has extension') as obviously true, rather than as nonsensical (*PI*, 251).

the norms that we discover to be in force *are binding for us*. By discovering that certain norms are in force within our community we discover how we ought to apply certain concepts and how we ought to use certain words. As no physical necessity is involved, we of course can -in the sense of physical possibility- use such words differently; but then, as Wittgenstein said and Quine repeated after him, we would ‘play another game’ (*PR*, 24b), i.e. we would be ‘opting out’ with respect to certain rule-governed practices that are characteristic of our community. Limited to that particular aspect, we would no longer belong to our community.

This suggests that such norms are actually obeyed in our community: if not, deliberately failing to follow them would not entail any ‘opting out’. Indeed, that’s the way it is: this is why we discover that certain norms are in force by *observing* (‘describing’, as Wittgenstein says) how we as a matter of fact go about doing things: how we (mostly) apply certain concepts and use certain words. Now, here an obvious methodological difficulty is lurking (as it has been pointed out many times): it is not clear *whom* are we supposed to observe: how many people, for how long, and which people in particular (so-called ‘experts’? or would anybody do?). Secondly, it is not clear *what exactly* are we supposed to observe: everyday linguistic behaviour in all its casual variety, or rather certain examples of behaviour that are regarded as representative or ‘paradigmatic’? Thirdly, passing from the description of behaviour to the singling out of a norm that such behaviour is regarded as obediently following may not be trivial: some, like the sceptic Kripkenstein, even believe that the very same behaviour can be regarded as obeying any among infinitely many different norms.

Wittgenstein appears to have thought that all such difficulties could be overcome: like Austin, he thought that by reflecting on ‘what we would say when’ we can grasp the norms we go by in our application of concepts, provided we have enough imagination or, as he put it, provided we don’t follow ‘a one-sided diet’ (*PI*, 593). Thus we can observe how we as a matter of fact apply certain concepts and determine how we ought to apply them (if we are willing to play that particular game, thus belonging to our community to that extent). Discovering that knowledge entails truth is discovering that within the practices where words such as ‘know’ and ‘true’ are used, the concepts of knowledge and truth are so applied that we do not call a propositional content ‘knowledge’ if we do not take it to be true. The latter formulation, ‘we do not call a propositional content ‘knowledge’ if we do not take it to be true’, can be read both as a description of our linguistic practice and as the statement of a norm, like ‘We do

not eat peas with our hands': it can be seen as a '*pushmi-pullyu* representation' in Millikan's sense (Millikan 1995), i.e. as both a description and a prescription.² Such statements, however, count as prescriptions (as already noted) only on the presupposition that one belongs, and intends to keep belonging to a given community (same with peas, for that matter).

This is, then, more or less what Wittgenstein means by 'conceptual investigation': what philosophy is, in his opinion (Z, 458). For a comparison with Williamson's conception, it is useful to make a distinction between the characterization of philosophy's way of doing things and a characterization of its results. Wittgenstein says that philosophy proceeds by describing our use of words. This looks quite different from what Williamson says: he insists that 'semantic knowledge' is insufficient to solve philosophical problems (*PoP*, 39-40). However, what Williamson appears to mean here is that the solution of a philosophical problem, such as the problem of the dryness of Mars, cannot come straight out of normal semantic competence: though perhaps we *could* come to the right answer by 'reflection of sufficient length and depth on [our] competence', such reflective powers cannot plausibly be regarded as part, or a necessary condition of normal semantic competence. In other words, it cannot be plausibly claimed that the solution of philosophical problems is directly generated by such knowledge and abilities as constitute normal semantic competence (by contrast, a normally competent person knows *-pace* Williamson- that stones do not think of Vienna, that bachelors are not married and that transvestites are not a monastic order). Wittgenstein, however, would not disagree: the kind of reflection that Wittgenstein has in mind, which is to a large extent reflection about, or from, *one's own* semantic competence rather than about some particular person's 'use of language', does not just amount to *exercising* one's semantic competence. As we know from Wittgenstein's writings, it involves reflection of considerable 'length and depth': it includes recourse to thought experiments and the creation and comparison of many examples; it does not rule out appeal to scientific results and to logic; and it exercises ordinary reasoning and, to a vast extent, imagination.³ Thus, the difference between

² For a partly different double reading of 'grammatical propositions' see Schroeder 2009, 103, 107.

³ Hence, if the results of a philosophical investigation were true propositions (as they are not) they would not be epistemologically analytic propositions in Williamson's sense, *not* because rejecting them would be compatible with normal competence as Williamson has it, *but* because accepting them would not immediately and trivially follow from the exercise of such competence.

Williamson's and Wittgenstein's conceptions of philosophy is not to be found in their conceptions of the philosophical 'method'. Of course, a vast stylistic gulf divides philosophy as practiced by Williamson from Wittgensteinian philosophy; however, discriminating prescriptions or prohibitions are not easily singled out.

The difference is rather to be found, I believe, in how they conceive of the aims and results of philosophical inquiry. For Williamson, philosophy's findings concerning (e.g.) the relation between knowledge and truth are about knowledge and truth, those very entities, whereas for Wittgenstein they are about the concepts of knowledge and truth; for Williamson, they are about reality (which includes both knowledge and truth), whereas for Wittgenstein they are about our language, or our 'form of representation'. This opposition stems from their respective views about necessity. For Wittgenstein, as we saw, necessity does not inhabit the world: no proposition that has descriptive content is necessary. Williamson, on the other hand, is convinced -like Kripke and many others- that there are essences and necessary properties: for example, it is a necessary property of pieces of knowledge that they are true. The proposition expressed by 'Pieces of knowledge are true' is a necessary truth about knowledge, hence about reality.

That for Wittgenstein necessity does not inhabit the world does not entail that it inhabits some other place. Wittgenstein reduces necessity to normativity: saying that bits of knowledge are necessarily true is just an infelicitous and misleading formulation of the rule 'Apply the concept of knowledge to *x* only if you are prepared to apply the concept of truth to *x*'. What looks like a necessary connection between entities is really one of the norms that govern our thought and language: the *müssen* is really a *sollen*. However, the norm at issue does govern -among other things- our descriptions of the world: for example, if we are not prepared to describe the content of some epistemic state as true we shall not describe it as a state of knowledge.⁴ In a similar fashion, scientific laws govern our descriptions of physical phenomena. Now, beginning with the *Tractatus* (6.341-6.342) Wittgenstein consistently acknowledged that descriptions based on different conceptual frameworks (e.g. different though empirically equivalent theories) are not bound to be fully equivalent from *every* viewpoint: some may work better than others (they may simplify certain practices, allow us to achieve our purposes in less time, etc.). The issue

⁴ This may be one reason why Wittgenstein says he doesn't want to talk only about words (*PI*, 370), as Hacker recalls to a different purpose (2009,339).

then arises of whether our ‘grammar’ -the rules governing our thought and talk- might not be somewhat responsible to reality: whether reality’s being such and such might not be a reason or perhaps a cause of our grammar’s being the network of rules it is. In Wittgensteinian philology, this issue is called ‘the problem of the arbitrariness of grammar’.⁵ It is well known that the greatest concession that Wittgensteinian grammar made to the world consisted in granting that if the world had been different -if certain ‘very general facts of nature’ had been different- it would probably have looked natural to us to think differently: different concepts might have looked natural to us (*PI*, II xii, cf. *Z*, 350). It is doubtful that this is enough to make grammar depend (whether causally or rationally) on the world’s constitution, thereby making conceptual normativity derivative upon how things are made and stand. But even if it *were* enough, that would not bring necessity back into the world: even if our grammar were somehow (causally or rationally) forced upon us by the nature of things, that would not make such nature necessary. It would just mean that nature imposes adequacy conditions upon the rules governing our representation of it: it forces us to represent it in a certain way, if our representation is to be adequate.

When Wittgenstein talks about ‘nature’ or ‘reality’ in these contexts, he is talking about the physical world. By contrast, if we were to have Williamson say that philosophy is concerned with reality (which he doesn’t say in so many words, so far as I recall), reality shouldn’t necessarily be taken to coincide with the physical world. It would include numbers and other logical and mathematical entities, as well as knowledge, truth, time, and more.⁶ Though the issue would be open whether all that ultimately reduces to physical objects and properties, it wouldn’t be a *preliminary* issue: we can say that epistemology is about knowledge (not about the concept of knowledge or the word ‘knowledge’) or that ethics is about the good even without having preliminarily established that knowledge and the good are physically respectable entities. It is not obvious that there

⁵ Amply discussed in Forster 2004.

⁶ Hence it looks question-begging just to assert that ‘whatever knowledge logic and mathematics yield, it is not ‘substantive knowledge of the world’’ (Hacker 2009, 346). On the other hand, as Glock rightly points out (p.341), that mathematics and logic provide new knowledge about reality cannot just be taken for granted either. Whether reality does or doesn’t include numbers, truth, etc. is not the kind of issue that can plausibly be regarded as settled.

are only physically respectable entities. By contrast, for Wittgenstein there is nothing but the physical world and our language with its rules: if an investigation is not about the physical world, then it is about language and its rules. Williamson, like the early Russell, appears to countenance - at least *prima facie*- any entity whatsoever that we appear to be wondering about. The questions we ask about them are to be taken literally, not 'demythologised', particularly if the demythologising suggestions are inherently unconvincing. For as a matter of fact, they fail to discriminate between allegedly conceptual questions and obviously non-conceptual ones; indeed, the very idea of a conceptual inquiry yielding conceptual truths looks suspicious, as the best explication of the notion of a conceptual truth, i.e. analytic truth, is not really viable in any of its versions. About this *pars destruens* of Williamson's view I will not, however, take stand here.

Wittgenstein and Williamson do not seem to disagree about what the philosophical problems are. Williamson believes that such problems can in principle be *solved*: they are questions that one can think of answering. In many cases -perhaps in every case- the answer is going to be a necessarily true proposition that is really about what it appears to be about, i.e. some aspects of reality: physical objects and properties such as the planet Mars and dryness, or entities -non-physical properties?- such as knowledge and truth.⁷ By contrast, for Wittgenstein the *genuinely* philosophical problems -those that are not empirical problems in disguise- are to be *dissolved*: we are to show that they are not about what they seem to be about, i.e. physical objects and properties or metaphysical objects and properties (so they are not the problems they seem to be). It is sometimes possible to show that philosophical questions misleadingly hint at certain conceptual connections, i.e. at certain features of our use of language. The thing to be done in such cases is to recall to mind such features as are implicit in our use of language (itself open to our inspection). The answer to the philosophical question will then consist in pointing to a

⁷ When this substantialistic view of philosophical truths is extended to extreme cases (e.g. when it is claimed that the statement that everything is identical with itself describes 'an obvious trait of everything' (Quine 1954), or 'a general feature of the way the world is' (Harman 1968)), Wittgensteinians are outraged; but it doesn't look very effective to reply that such formulations involve a misuse of language, for we do not use 'trait' or 'feature' for *universal* attributes (Schroeder 2009, 96). The Wittgensteinian point here is not that there are no universal features (why not?), but that '*This* is not identical with itself' is nonsense.

rule, e.g. to the rule for the application of the concepts of knowledge and truth.

Wittgenstein's view is based on his reductionist conception of necessity. I am not claiming that Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy straightforwardly follows from his rejection of necessity-in-the-world;⁸ clearly, however, if one is persuaded that there are no necessarily true (or necessarily false) propositions, one will hardly maintain that questions such as 'What is knowledge?' are partly answered by stating a necessary connection between knowledge and truth. Hence, it would be natural to argue against Wittgenstein's view of philosophy as conceptual analysis by criticizing its grounds, i.e. Wittgenstein's conception of necessity. Williamson doesn't, because the Kripkean metaphysics of necessity and the idea of a *posteriori* necessity are part of the theoretical background he is taking for granted.⁹ There is of course nothing wrong in just assuming a philosophically respectable and widely shared conception of necessity: if on that basis Williamson had refuted Wittgenstein's view of philosophy as conceptual analysis, his overall argument would be on a par with Wittgenstein's argument (from the reduction of necessity to normativity to the claim that philosophy is conceptual analysis). If on the other hand Williamson had refuted Wittgenstein's claim that philosophy is conceptual analysis on independent grounds, his argument would count as an indirect refutation of Wittgenstein's views on necessity. However, Williamson has done neither, for the conceptual analysis claim he argues against is not quite Wittgenstein's claim (he could have tried to show that Wittgenstein's views reduce to the views he is arguing against, but, again, he hasn't). Moreover, it is not at all clear that Williamson's refutation of the claims he does argue against is independent of Kripkean assumptions about necessity.¹⁰ This is why I said that Williamson's argu-

⁸ As Andrea Bianchi pointed out in discussion, Wittgenstein might have chosen an eliminativist attitude towards necessity, like Quine's. If he took up a reductionist attitude instead, it must have been because he recognized the distinction between necessity and generality, though he believed that necessity was misunderstood by metaphysics.

⁹ In Marconi 2010 I tried to show that the notion of a *posteriori* necessity should still be regarded as more controversial than it is usually taken to be.

¹⁰ For example, his crucial conclusion that modal-analytic truths are not thereby 'insubstantial' rests upon the possibility that they might express 'profound metaphysical necessit[ies] about the nature of the world'; an example of a modal-analytic truth that expresses a necessity about the nature of the world is the familiar 'Water is H₂O'.

ments have no great bite against Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy, which is, after all, the most eminent member of the family Williamson would like to exile, as their views 'are unbacked by any argument that has withstood the test of recent time' (*PoP*, 19).

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