Essays in Philosophy

Book Review
Doing Philosophy: From Common Curiosity to Logical Reasoning

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Doing Philosophy: From Common Curiosity to Logical Reasoning
Timothy Williamson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, x+ 154 pp. including Further Reading and Index; 9 black-and-white images, $18.95
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Not too long ago, I got into a fight with Immanuel Kant. The fight was kind of one-sided, what with Kant being dead and all, but I still kind of suspect he might've won. The point of our disagreement involved how to teach philosophy to introductory students, those students who probably have never taken a philosophy course and may not even really understand what the point of the discipline is, or why they should care. Poor Kant was more of an innocent bystander than anything, but I came out swinging and he went down fast. (Translation: I revamped my syllabus for Intro to Philosophy, and I blew up the canon. Kant was one of the first to go.) I understand Timothy Williamson's *Doing Philosophy* as having a parallel goal. The idea is to have a book that newcomers to philosophy might read in just such an introductory class. Perhaps he's also trying to reach naïve general readers, but the details and organization of the book seem to be speaking to students first. So in a sense, we were both looking to shake up how students get introduced to the field.

I wanted to blow up the canon, so I debated using a book like this rather than primary literature. After great consideration, I remain wedded to the idea of primary texts; I simply moved toward a more inclusive set of authors so that our diverse student body might come to see philosophy as not just a thing old white men do. Williamson, in a sense, argues that a book like his, rather than reading the primary literature, is a better way to awaken philosophical interest in students. He devotes a chapter to this topic: chapter 8 of 10, "Using the History of Philosophy," where he seems to agree that primary texts are important, but hints that an introduction that gets students philosophizing right away might be preferable (this might be true). He likens untrained philosophers to "intellectual tourists" who may wander in and enjoy some of what they read, but will have a superficial appreciation of it. But Williamson and I appear to disagree about more than whether to begin with primary literature or not. Williamson indeed seems quite wedded to the canon that I wanted to challenge. In a book of 150 pages, the author manages to cram in (on a quick count) 64 references to named philosophers, and in many cases offers quick summaries of their importance or arguments (although in many more cases, they are mentioned in passing with no more than a sentence). But (and this I counted more than once), there are only two women among those 64. And one of them is mentioned only in a caption on a collage of photos, so she doesn't even get mentioned in the text proper. This book was not a revision of something published in 1950, but was itself published in 2018, by what is widely regarded as the best publishing house in academic philosophy. I apologize if I find this somewhat shocking, on both counts.

At best, this reveals an ignorance of the actual richness of the philosophical literature that excites new students, and at worst, well, it's a serious perpetuation of some of the worst aspects of a field I love and want desperately to improve. Perhaps both. One might

fall back on the image of a philosopher so high in the ivory tower that he is removed from current debates and excuse the whole thing, except an entire page is devoted, in chapter 4, ("Clarifying Terms") to discussing "the recent bitter controversy about the word 'woman'" (40). It doesn't go well, starting with the idea that there was once a non-controversial use of the term (a nice reminder that I might want to add Sojourner Truth to my own syllabus). It's possible this is just a poorly-chosen example, but the current state of professional philosophy is a bit damaged, and if one ventures into the public spaces of the internet, one doesn't need to look hard to see established senior professional philosophers publicly naming and attempting to shame junior philosophers and graduate students (graduate students!) for supporting trans rights, or being unapologetically feminist. A page dedicated to debating the term "woman" when actual women are absent from the book is not a great look for our discipline.

There is an aspirational aspect to this book that I found almost admirable. Williamson argues that one of the great things about philosophy is that every person is on equal footing, and the arguments speak for themselves. The strongest argument will always win out, and the only reason someone might be hesitant to stand up and challenge a famous philosopher (during a conference Q and A, for example) must be a lack of self-confidence. He implies that philosophy is super cooperative because we all agree to let the arguments do the work. Bullying has no place here! We are all truth-seekers on equal footing! If this is an aspirational point being made to convince undergraduates or naïve readers of its truth, then I can see the benefit, at least in principle. In reality, though, this is absolutely not what our discipline is like sometimes. Williamson thinks that if the emperor has no clothes, anyone could (and must!) stand up and tell him so. But saying this ignores the reality of contemporary philosophy and its place in the world, and ignores the fact that some people are simply taken less seriously because they are a woman, or young, or a person of color, not-cis, or (heaven forbid) some combination of those. It would be fantastic if this great equality were true, and we ought to tell undergraduates that we hope it will be someday. (I do tell my undergraduates this!) But if this is claimed as a historical fact about philosophy, then there is a serious danger here. One might then excuse a naïve reader for thinking that it's simply true that white men had stronger arguments historically and continue to dominate the field because they still (coincidentally!) have all the best arguments. What else could it be, when the field is still so overwhelmingly white and male? There are still only two women in this book. So rather than merely ignoring the actual ways power differentials play into who gets taught in our classes and written about in our books and offered stages at our conferences, claims like this actually reinforce the harmful view that the people in those books deserve to be there more than the people who were intentionally written out of them. This is one of the last things I want to teach brand new, aspirational philosophers.

There is a chapter on philosophy's overlap with various other disciplines, which is an important chapter I don't see often enough in books like this. Philosophy has always been and must continue to be interdisciplinary, perhaps now more than ever. The chapter begins with a discussion of social anthropology, a discipline which philosophy has so much potential to draw from and feed back into. But here, the discussion avoids humility and instead argues that there is no deep conceptual difference between languages in the midst of a point about the death of relativism as a research program, and goes on to include a somewhat embarrassing photo of Edward Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973) a white Christian man who went to Sudan, studied the Azande people there, "raising objections to their beliefs and listening to their replies" (114). In the photo, Evans-Pritchard sits comfortably in a chair surrounded by dark-skinned "Zande boys," standing or sitting on the ground beside him.

Evans-Pritchard may have a role to play in the history of philosophy, and of course in the history of social anthropology, a field he is often attributed with having founded. But this photo appears with little contextualizing and little commentary, making it seem like there's nothing problematic about the approach, interactions, or analysis that Williamson offers of the situation. In 2018, when the ethics and philosophy of technology have never been more important in relation to Silicon Valley companies, there's a real missed opportunity here to connect social anthropology to the daily lives of students through the tools they use and the often-weird and problematic cultures of the companies that make them (as one possible alternative to appearing to endorse colonialism instead). The other disciplines included in the chapter offer a nice small slice of the ways philosophy can speak with other fields, but the examples used tend to be so niche that I suspect undergraduates are very unlikely to be hooked by them.

The final full chapter, usually reserved to bring everything together and show the reader the most exciting future they can participate in within the discipline, does something different here. Williamson's last full chapter is instead on "Model-building," detailing the ins and outs of compositional semantics in a way that guarantees no undergraduate is going to walk away understanding it, assuming they could even be convinced to actually read it. He does argue that model-building is the future of philosophy, which is a solid debatable claim appropriate for a closing chapter, but the details of extensional and intensional semantics overwhelm any big-picture message students might be likely to take away.

In total, the book is a short, quick read, clocking in at roughly 150 pages that cover ten chapters (and an eleventh concluding chapter, "The Future of Philosophy," that is merely one page long, revealing perhaps a level of pessimism that we might expect, given the

current cultural shift against the humanities broadly in favor of STEM subjects. This might also explain why Williamson begins that concluding page with the sentence, "Philosophy is a science in its own right…") The overall organization of the book is fairly well-described in the chapter titles, although it isn't clear how well any of the chapters would stand alone, since the author builds on each previous chapter. Organizationally, though, the book contains much of what you'd expect to find in such a volume: an opening that talks about the value of common sense (chapter 2), the nature of argument ("Disputing", chapter 3), the value of thought experiments (chapter 5), general methodological points about comparing theories (chapter 6) and deduction (chapter 7), ways to approach the history of philosophy (chapter 8), and the value of interdisciplinarity ("Using Other Fields", chapter 9).

I'm left wondering if the entire book is just too clever, saying one semi-objectionable thing after another in the hopes of immediately dragging the reader into the practice of philosophy, wherein we can't help but produce counter-example after counter-example for so many of the claims offered. There seems genuinely to be a handful of claims made for precisely this purpose, but surely this isn't the point (or the style) of the entire book; the author means what he argues here. And in fact, several of the chapters do their jobs quite well- the chapter on thought experiments is a balanced and useful discussion, and the chapter that discusses the philosophical methodology smuggles in quite a lot of good content, touching on the philosophy of mind, mathematics, science, and logic. I may disagree with some of the content as well as the overall approach the book takes, but I guess we'll see where the debate takes us, if the strongest argument really always wins out. In this case though, I think I'd almost rather bring back Kant.