Knowledge-Based Cultivation of Curiosity

I find myself largely agreeing with Timothy Williamson's first lecture, 'Philosophy and Common Sense', both regarding the broad outlines of the type of account he has presented and regarding the specific details he has chosen to address within the limited amount of time available to him in the course of one lecture. Therefore, I am happy to keep my comments brief. And, rather than criticising what he has said, I shall try to offer reflections on some of the issues that Williamson's lecture raises, but which he may not have had the time to address in detail.

I will organise my reflections around four main issues.

1 'What is philosophy?' (Notice the quotation marks.)

2 What is common sense?

3 What follows from comparing proto-science and proto-philosophy?

4 What is a good mixture of common sense and curiosity to cultivate?

Before turning to the first of these issues, I want to make one general comment. An important achievement of Williamson's first lecture is having presented a compelling story of the naturalness of philosophy, that is, how natural it is to engage in doing philosophy. This is an important kind of story to tell, because philosophy tends to seem unnatural to many people, giving them a low opinion of it. The story is compelling, partly because Williamson is practising what he preaches. When developing his account of the naturalness of philosophy Williamson is of course engaged in doing philosophy himself, and he manages to do this bit of philosophy in exactly the way that he says should be possible. Williamson argues that all it takes for an individual in suitable circumstances to engage in doing philosophy are common sense and curiosity; and in attempting to show this, he does indeed appear to be relying on nothing but these two basic ingredients. Thus, his account appears to be doubly demonstrated: the way in which he presents its general claims appears at the same time to constitute an instantiation of them.

To be sure, the apparent reliance on nothing but his own common sense and curiosity in presenting the account must be regarded as a considerable feat, even if Williamson is right that philosophy normally requires no more than that. Developing an account of the cognitive basis required for an individual to engage in doing philosophy is not the sort of thing that philosophy starts with for an individual. On the contrary, it is a rather more advanced step; developing a plausible account of the matter and presenting it in a clear and precise fashion, as Williamson has done, is no easy task for even the most experienced philosophers.

1 'What is philosophy?' That is, of course, the big question in the background of this entire lecture series. I am quoting the question rather than asking it, because I want to talk about the question more than I want to ask it.

Williamson says that, when it comes to philosophy or the word 'philosophy', 'abstract definitions […] are not very useful'. I agree. But I suppose Williamson would also agree with me that some abstract definitions might nevertheless be somewhat useful. So I want to press him a little to try to see just how useful or useless he finds definitions of philosophy or 'philosophy'.

What we are really interested in as philosophers, if we are interested in anything like a definition in this connection, are definitions not of the word 'philosophy' but of the thing that the word is supposed to represent, philosophy (without quotation marks). Nevertheless, a linguistic definition can sometimes be useful to someone who wants to know what this thing called 'philosophy' really is. For example, suppose that someone asks you what philosophy is, and you begin by telling them that the English word 'philosophy' derives—like its European cousins 'filosofía', 'philosophie', etc.—from ancient Greek and has often been translated as 'love of wisdom'. This might well be useful to them, even though by itself it is unlikely to be *very* useful.

Now let us consider definitions of the thing, philosophy, as opposed to the word. In this connection, Williamson says: 'I understand philosophy as a science, but not a *natural* science.' This is an abstract definition, albeit not a precise one because it will certainly apply to mathematics as well, which is the paradigm of a non-natural science. Moreover, I for one think that this definition, however tentative, is also a useful one. In fact, it is obvious that Williamson offers this tentative definition because it is useful at this point in the argument. It leaves much left to explain, but the relation between philosophy and science is a sufficiently important and

controversial issue that defining philosophy as a non-natural science clearly constitutes a substantive claim and, to this extent, is a useful thing to do if one is in the business of explaining what philosophy is along such lines.

It seems likely that Williamson had in mind the kind of definition that seeks to provide necessary and sufficient conditions. But that is not the only kind of definition there is. And even if it was, might not such a definition still be of significant use, especially perhaps if one used it as a model following the model-building strategy that Williamson recommends elsewhere, so that such a definition may be useful even if it is in many ways false?[1]

More generally, it may be somewhat surprising that Williamson has not presented the same sort of succinct account in his work on what philosophy is as he characteristically has done in other work such as his defence of epistemicism about vagueness (the view that vagueness is a form of ignorance) and necessitism about ontology (the view that it is necessary what there is). It is not clear what the reason for this might be, but it seems clear enough that he is defending a view that could be accurately described as a form of scientism about philosophy. Of course, this label would come with some unwanted baggage, but that does not make it less applicable, and Williamson has not shied away from reviving other types of view that many had previously thought indefensible.

2 What is common sense? Williamson begins his story of the naturalness of philosophy by telling us that a natural answer to the question of where philosophy starts—more precisely, what cognitive basis philosophy needs to get started—is 'common sense'. He then offers various explanations of what he takes common sense to be, which is clearly appropriate given that the term has a varied use in ordinary English today and a bit of a history in philosophy too. Williamson's explanations can be summed up by the following three statements that he makes.

Common sense knowledge:	widely shared knowledge
Common sense belief:	widely shared belief
Common sense cognitive methods:	widely shared cognitive methods

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[1] See 'Philosophy and Models' (lecture 6, this volume). See also Timothy Williamson, 'Model-building in Philosophy', in Russell Blackford and Damien Broderick, eds, *Philosophy's Future: The Problem of Philosophical Progress* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017, 159–73).

But looking at these three statements has made me wonder why the notion of common sense is even employed. In this context, 'widely shared' appears to mean just the same as 'common'. Thus, it seems it might have been the better choice to speak simply of common knowledge, belief etc. instead of common *sense* knowledge, belief, etc. Perhaps Williamson has left part of his reason for preferring 'common sense' implicit?

While trying to figure this out, I thought about how 'common sense' is typically translated into German, namely as *gesunder Menschenverstand*, literally 'healthy human reason'. Williamson does not, however, want to restrict common sense to humans. In fact, he has argued that common sense and curiosity, the only two requirements he has mentioned for getting philosophy started, can also be found in non-human animals. So can non-human animals perhaps engage in doing philosophy too? Where would Williamson draw the line? And how? Is it a matter of degree of common sense or curiosity, or is there something else to the cognitive basis required for philosophy (such as language, for example, which he says 'enables us to construct more abstract questions, to become curious about more abstract matters')?

Of course, Williamson only claims that common sense constitutes a natural answer to the question of where philosophy starts. So perhaps that is not his final answer but merely one that allows him to tell a compelling story of the naturalness of philosophy, as he so masterfully has done.

The same consideration applies to curiosity, which is the second of the two things he says are needed for philosophy to get started. If, however, Williamson's intention is indeed to give nothing but a natural answer to suit his narrative, then will it not perhaps be the case that curiosity could serve equally well as the sole driver of the story? That is, not as an answer to the question of what *more* is required for philosophy, in addition to common sense, but as a better answer *instead* of this first one? For does not curiosity, on Williamson's plausible definition of it as an appetite for knowledge, entail enough of that which he wishes to pick out by 'common sense'? You can only have an appetite for knowledge, if you have at least some knowledge already; in addition, it can perhaps be granted that an individual with an appetite for knowledge is normally capable of acquiring new knowledge.

3 What follows from comparing proto-science and proto-philosophy? Williamson thinks that curiosity naturally leads to all sorts of enquiries including, soon enough, abstract questions

of a proto-philosophical or proto-scientific sort. That seems right. Here are some of his examples of such questions in the form in which they would typically be asked by humans. What is water? What is earth? What is air? What is fire? What is light? What is space? What is time? What is life? What is death? Williamson points out that initially no separation is felt between questions that are proto-scientific and ones that are proto-philosophical, and that many are actually both (for example, 'What is time?'). And he notes: 'It would be totally unnatural to classify the proto-scientific questions as "empirical" and the proto-philosophical ones as "conceptual".'

Regarding this last remark, one might be inclined to take Williamson as implying criticism of those philosophers who have argued that we can distinguish actual scientific and philosophical questions along such lines. But he must be aware that, even if this kind of classification at the proto-stage—which he says is unnatural—is incorrect, it may still be correct at a later stage, once science and philosophy have developed further.[2] This raises the question of what exactly Williamson's intended lessons are by making this particular remark and, more generally, by comparing proto-science and proto-philosophy.

4 What is a good mixture of common sense and curiosity to cultivate? In the final part of his lecture, Williamson turns to the question of what role common sense may play once philosophy has started. Having previously observed that 'curiosity drives us to ask such questions even when we have no idea how to go about answering them (e.g. what is time?)', Williamson begins this part of his lecture by noting that 'common sense seems a good way to stop philosophy going crazy'. Next, Williamson rejects radical scepticism as well as the phenomenalist view according to which all evidence can only consist of subjective appearances and, on this basis, presents the plausible hypothesis that a subject's evidence is precisely their knowledge. From this, and the obvious fact that everything that is known can be used as evidence in philosophy, he concludes that common sense knowledge can be so used.

Although only common sense knowledge can constitute evidence, in practice common sense beliefs also come into play. This is because an individual may know something without knowing that they know it (including in the case of common sense knowledge), and an individual

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[2] To be explicit, I am not saying that it is correct to classify scientific questions as (in some sense) 'empirical' and philosophical ones as 'conceptual'. In fact, I have argued against such a classification elsewhere. See Sebastian Sunday Grève, 'The Importance of Understanding Each Other in Philosophy', *Philosophy* 90 (2015), 213–39.

may not know something but falsely believe that they know it (including in the case of common sense belief). Williamson thinks that there are no infallible sources of evidence. He says:

> Instead of a hopeless search for infallible sources of evidence, we should concentrate on cultivating the ability to recognize our mistakes, where we have incorrectly treated something as part of our evidence. We accept the inevitability of sometimes making mistakes, and ready ourselves to correct them.

I find myself in full agreement with Williamson about these matters. Now I want to ask the question regarding the right mixture of common sense and curiosity in the same two ways in which Williamson, at the beginning of his lecture, asked where philosophy starts: namely on the one hand for an individual and, on the other, for a culture.

Suppose our thinking was essentially the mediation between the voice of common sense and the voice of curiosity. For example, when the voice of curiosity pushes one towards more and more abstract theorising, the other voice will urge resistance against any conclusions that might be inconsistent with common sense, whilst any particular resistance may in turn be scrutinised and, by chance, overturned following the voice of curiosity, and so on. Now, for an individual considered in relative isolation, Williamson's account clearly recommends maintaining a more or less even balance between the two at any time. For a culture considered as a whole, you would naturally want the same. The interesting question is what we should say about individuals from a cultural point of view. Would having only philosophers who are individually balanced be better than, say, having no individually balanced philosophers but a philosophical culture that is nonetheless balanced overall?

Consider our present culture of professional philosophy, which is in many ways a highly specialised discipline. Given the sheer size and complexity of many, if not all, important philosophical issues, it seems only appropriate that professional philosophers should be organised—as they are—according to some division of labour, including a division between those who, as it were, represent the voice of common sense and those who represent the voice of curiosity on any given matter. Should we perhaps advocate for even more, or more extreme, individual specialisation along this dimension?

Such extremism actually comes in familiar types and oppositions, including dogmatism on the side of common sense and scepticism (or critical philosophy) on the side of curiosity as well

as, in general, all sorts of views and theories that conflict with common sense on the side of curiosity and appropriate opposition on the side of common sense. More, and more extreme, individual specialisation along this dimension seems generally desirable. At the same time, an extremist culture naturally requires moderation. So there should probably be a third type of specialisation which will be anti-extremist, except insofar as it will be extremely moderate. Thus, even in an extremely specialised philosophical culture that is perfectly balanced overall with regard to those who represent the voice of common sense and those who represent the voice of curiosity on any given matter, there will still be the need for individually balanced philosophers if only to ensure efficient communication between the extremes.

The point applies equally to the question of specialisation along other dimensions. It is perhaps no coincidence that many of the most celebrated philosophers of the recent and distant past were not as specialised as the majority of professional philosophers are today and often less so than many of their contemporaries.

To sum up, the story Williamson tells in this first lecture of how natural it is to engage in doing philosophy is a compelling one and therefore an important achievement. The story not only shows that philosophy is as natural as anything, it has also prepared the ground for Williamson's larger vision of philosophy as a non-natural science, which will be a central theme throughout the remaining nine lectures. This kind of view could be accurately described as scientism about philosophy. If Williamson started describing it in this way, this might spark a fruitful controversy. The story itself might perhaps be told even better simply in terms of curiosity, without reference to 'common sense'. Incidentally, the subtitle *From Common Curiosity to Logical Reasoning* of Williamson's recent book *Doing Philosophy*, which deals with some of the same questions, suggests as much.[3] Again, curiosity presupposes at least a certain amount of knowledge, and it seems fair to grant that a curious individual is normally capable of acquiring new knowledge. Thus, philosophy and science can be shown to be products of the same natural pursuit of a knowledge-based cultivation of curiosity.

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[3] Timothy Williamson, *Doing Philosophy: From Common Curiosity to Logical Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).