

SØREN OVERGAARD AND GIUSEPPINA D'ORO

---

## Introduction

### I

Despite countless substantive differences in terms of style, general outlook, and much more, most philosophers – whether ‘analytic’ or ‘continental’ – arguably used to agree on one thing: that the activity of philosophizing differed in significant ways from the typical activities of empirical scientists. Even Quine, for whom philosophy was straightforwardly ‘a part of science’, held that the former belonged at ‘the abstract and theoretical end’ of the latter (Quine, in Magee 1982: 143). Thus, unabashed methodological naturalists, their explicit doctrines notwithstanding, did not necessarily *do* philosophy any differently from the way it had traditionally been done: in the main without relying substantively on – let alone actively collecting – empirical data. In practice, if not always in theory, it was assumed that philosophy could, indeed perhaps should, be done from an ‘armchair’.

In recent years, however, this erstwhile consensus – or near-consensus – has shattered. The rise of experimental philosophy (see Knobe and Nichols 2008) has challenged deeply entrenched ideas about how analytic philosophy is to be done. Instead of offering *a priori* arguments for and against philosophical theses, experimental philosophers use the standard methods of social psychology and other empirical sciences to test such theses. Across the analytic/continental divide, a comparable trend can be seen, for example, in calls for the ‘naturalization’ of phenomenology, as well as in recent, naturalistically motivated bids to discard post-Kantian continental philosophy altogether.<sup>1</sup>

### I

These challenges to the traditional 'armchair' practices of the philosopher have moved methodological questions – questions concerning the methods of philosophizing – towards the top of the philosophical agenda. Such questions have not always been considered important. Gilbert Ryle, for example, notoriously argued that 'preoccupation with questions about methods tends to distract us from prosecuting the methods themselves. We run, as a rule, worse, not better, if we think a lot about our feet' (Ryle 2009 [1953]: 331). Ryle seems to be suggesting two distinct reasons for thinking it a bad idea to pay much attention to methodology. First, it may simply distract us from presumably more important work in other areas of philosophy: we get too caught up in thinking *about* the methods of philosophizing and neglect to *use* them. Second, Ryle also suggests a sort of centipede effect: that the more we worry about how to philosophize the less well we are able to do it. Neither argument seems conclusive, however. First, there simply is no reason to think a philosopher could not make important contributions to other areas of philosophy, while also (occasionally, say) addressing methodological issues. Second, since critical reflection is central to what philosophers do, it is far from obvious that the centipede effect applies. Perhaps too much reflection will impede one's performance when skiing or cycling, but surely not when the task at hand is to think. In this way, philosophizing, as Timothy Williamson writes, 'is not like riding a bicycle, best done without thinking about it' (Williamson 2007: 8).<sup>2</sup>

Ryle's dismissive attitude towards philosophical methodology is perhaps somewhat understandable, given that he was writing at a time when philosophers – at least at Oxford – believed they had already attained the methodological tools to solve all the traditional problems of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> In such a situation, perhaps, it is best just to get on with it. For after all, as Karl Popper – a contemporary of Ryle – put it, 'a philosopher should philosophise: he should try to solve philosophical problems, rather than talk about philosophy' (Popper 1968: 68).<sup>4</sup> But obviously, the current situation is a very different one that makes Ryle's and Popper's attitudes difficult to justify. For when it is entirely up for grabs what the proper methods of philosophizing, if there are any such, might be, then there is little chance of making much headway with the philosophical problems that Popper is referring to. At any rate, any suggested solution

is likely to be controversial. For when philosophers disagree over whether there is a place for experimental methods within philosophy, say, their disagreement is in part precisely about which sorts of evidence bear on philosophical problems. Someone who thinks of philosophizing as consisting entirely in *a priori* conceptual analysis will hardly accept that experimental data has any bearing on her research. Conversely, someone who believes such 'armchair' methods are in serious need of supplementation and potential replacement by experimental research is not, without further ado, going to accept the deliverances of the armchair analyst's musings as evidence for anything other than what that particular individual is inclined to say.

There are other, more general reasons to be sceptical of Popper's and Ryle's dismissive attitude towards philosophical methodology. Ryle and Popper seem to assume a neat distinction between philosophical problems or questions proper and questions about philosophy and its methods. But – quite apart from the fact that in practice, as just seen, the former cannot be entirely isolated from the latter – it is unclear what philosophical justification might be given for assuming this distinction. To be sure, questions about *how* philosophy is (to be) done belong to a part of philosophy often referred to as 'metaphilosophy'. This name suggests, perhaps, that methodological enquiry 'look[s] down on philosophy from above, or beyond' (Williamson 2007: ix), and thus that methodological questions belong to 'a distinct higher-order discipline' (Glock 2008: 6).

But the term 'metaphilosophy' is not mandatory – it is just a term – and some reject it precisely because it suggests that when we are discussing philosophical method we are no longer doing philosophy proper.<sup>5</sup> Presumably, few people would deny that questions concerning the nature of science and its methodology belong to philosophy proper. Certainly Popper would accept that much: 'the critical inquiry into the sciences, their findings, and their methods', he writes, 'remains a characteristic of philosophical inquiry' (Popper 1975: 53). Yet if this is part of philosophical enquiry proper, then surely the corresponding questions about philosophy must be as well. (After all, it is hard to see where else such questions might belong.) This ought to be particularly obvious to someone like Popper who thinks philosophy 'ought never to be, indeed ... never can be, divorced from science' (*ibid.*).

While this is of course strictly *ad hominem*, the general point here is one that everyone ought to accept: if questions about the nature of science and art, say, are genuine philosophical questions, then corresponding questions about philosophy must be as well. As Cavell puts it, then, 'philosophy is one of its own normal topics' (2002: xxxii). Surely one does not beg any major (meta-)philosophical questions if one takes philosophy to include the critical examination of the varieties of human knowledge and understanding, and of the methods by which such knowledge and understanding may be acquired. But if so, the philosophical project must remain incomplete unless it includes a critical examination of philosophy itself. It is for this reason that Wilfrid Sellars asserts that it is 'this reflection on the place of philosophy itself, in the scheme of things which is the distinctive trait of the philosopher', so that 'in the absence of this critical reflection on the philosophical enterprise, one is at best but a potential philosopher' (Sellars 1991: 3).

## II

This volume aims to provide an overview of the most important positions and debates on philosophical methodology. While naturalistic challenges have been instrumental in terms of putting methodological issues firmly on the agenda, the issues that are thereby raised go beyond the specific debates about whether or not to 'naturalize' one or another traditional method. For if the orthodox philosophical methodology is in question, this could be a sign that philosophy has taken a wrong turn somewhere. 'Naturalizing' some version of that methodology, then, is not the only alternative to business as usual. Another option is to explore other perspectives on how to do philosophy. Consequently, the chapters in this volume approach the question of how to do philosophy from a wide range of perspectives, including conceptual analysis, critical theory, deconstruction, experimental philosophy, hermeneutics, Kantianism, methodological naturalism, phenomenology, and pragmatism.

Within philosophical methodology, one can distinguish between descriptive and normative questions. Descriptive questions concern the methods that philosophers actually use (or advocate), or have

used (or advocated) historically. We might inquire, for example, how large a proportion of the current philosophical community design and conduct experiments as part of their philosophical research. By contrast, normative philosophical methodology concerns not what philosophers actually do, but what they *ought* to be doing: what the *correct* or *proper* methods of philosophizing are. Since most will agree that the majority of philosophers actually conduct their research from the armchair, arguably the most interesting challenge that methodological 'naturalists' raise is a normative one. Consequently, this volume addresses normative methodology: the chapters present, discuss, and often defend particular views on how philosophy ought to be done.

As mentioned, philosophical methodology belongs to a part of philosophy – mostly called 'metaphilosophy', but perhaps more felicitously labelled 'the philosophy of philosophy' – in which the topic is philosophy itself. Other important questions in this area include the questions of what philosophy *is* and why it might be thought valuable.<sup>6</sup> These questions are obviously connected. If one thinks of philosophy as an empirical science along the lines of experimental psychology, certain conclusions about the proper method would – *ceteris paribus* – follow. Furthermore, a certain view about the value of philosophy would also suggest itself: like other empirical sciences, philosophy advances our knowledge in a particular domain or set of domains. Conversely, suppose you believe that the task of philosophy 'is not to add to the sum of human knowledge, but to enable us to attain a clear understanding of what is already known' (Hacker 1996: 272–3). Such a view on the value of philosophizing seems to have clear negative implications with respect to methodology – as empirical methods are precisely designed to 'add to the sum of human knowledge', they would (*ceteris paribus*) seem unsuited for philosophy, on the current understanding. For the same reason, it seems philosophy would have to be construed as an enterprise fundamentally distinct from the sciences within which such methods are essential.

Ultimately, then, one cannot separate the question of how we should do philosophy from the question of what we can expect philosophy to do for us. Consequently, although our focus is on philosophical methodology, the essays in this volume place this topic in the wider metaphilosophical context. That context notably

also includes questions concerning style. Depending on what one thinks philosophy is, and how one thinks it is best carried out, different literary styles – and perhaps even genres – might be called for. If one thinks that a central task of philosophizing is to effect some change in the way we lead our lives, say, then the style and format of a scientific research article may not be as appropriate as the current majority of philosophers seems to think it is.

### III

The volume is divided into four parts. The chapters in Part I offer general conceptions of philosophy, centred on the question of what the point of philosophizing might be. Philosophy is sometimes claimed to be concerned with abstract theoretical discussions that are only tenuously connected with any concerns of real life, and are all the more pointless for being seemingly irresolvable. The contributions of Alessandra Tanesini, Nicholas Rescher, and A. W. Moore discuss the first part of that rather disparaging view of philosophy, while Herman Cappelen's contribution questions the common assumption that philosophy is marred by persistent disagreement. The topic of Part II is the method of conceptual analysis – arguably still the most widely used tool in the analytic philosopher's toolkit – and its recent naturalistic critics and competitors. Hans-Johann Glock, Amie L. Thomasson, and Frank Jackson present and defend contemporary varieties of conceptual analysis, while Hilary Kornblith and Jonathan M. Weinberg articulate naturalistic programmes according to which the traditional methods of 'armchair' analysis must be guided and constrained in various ways by empirical research.

The chapters in Part III address a variety of methodological views that belong neither to the mainstream of analytic philosophy, nor to continental philosophy in the usual sense of that word. Robert Hanna conceives of philosophy as 'rational anthropology' and argues that its proper methodology can be extracted from Kant's critical philosophy. Giuseppina D'Oro's contribution presents and defends a philosophical methodology derived from the English idealist philosopher R. G. Collingwood. According to Robert B. Talisse's contribution, there is a tendency within pragmatist philosophy to relocate standard (first-order) philosophical disputes to the metaphilosophical level, which Talisse argues can be resisted

by embracing a 'metaphilosophically minimalist' conception of pragmatism. David Macarthur defends a variety of 'metaphysical quietism' – roughly, the view that philosophers should critically reflect on the problems of metaphysics, not attempt to solve them – inspired by Wittgenstein. Robert Piercey's contribution contends that the notorious divide between analytic and continental philosophy is best seen as a metaphilosophical divide, and suggests that it is bridged in the metaphilosophies of Rorty and Ricoeur, both of which maintain that philosophy and the history of philosophy are inseparable.

Part IV turns to perspectives from continental philosophy. David R. Cerbone discusses whether the method of phenomenology involves a break with everyday life and experience, which undermines the phenomenologists' aim of articulating everyday experience in a way their readers will recognize. The contribution by Jack Reynolds and Patrick Stokes articulates and defends key aspects of existentialist methodology, including existential philosophers' use of unconventional forms of dissemination. Centred on a reading of the eighteenth-century German hermeneutic philosopher J. G. Herder, Kristin Gjesdal outlines a hermeneutical methodology and defends it against Gadamer's influential criticisms of methodological approaches to hermeneutics. Fabian Freyenhagen's contribution addresses the uneasy relationship between critical theory – typically associated with the so-called Frankfurt School – and traditional philosophy, focusing in particular on the case of Adorno. Developing and extending ideas from Bergson, Deleuze, Derrida, and others, Leonard R. Lawlor outlines a deconstructionist methodology aimed at liberation from conventional modes of thought. Finally, Jean-Luc Petit's contribution adopts the perspective of 'naturalized phenomenology' and discusses whether the experience of patients with Parkinson's disease poses a problem for traditional Husserlian phenomenology.

This collection provides a useful snapshot of the contemporary methodological debates. In analytic philosophy, such debates have traditionally tended to revolve around a dispute between philosophers who seek to construct theories about reality and those who on the other hand are intent on dissolving philosophical problems by showing that they are grounded in misuses of language. An implication of this way of cutting the cake is that if the task of

philosophical analysis is not to construct theories which contribute to the advancement of human knowledge then conceptual analysis is relegated to a purely therapeutic function. A number of contributions in this collection, however, question the view that philosophy can have a positive role to play only in so far as it makes substantive claims about the structure of reality. What emerges here is a variety of nuanced attempts to articulate some middle ground between armchair metaphysics and linguistic therapy.

The methodological angle on the analytic/continental divide also reflects a growing view that while the distinction is useful in some ways, it is problematic in others because it cuts across more kosher philosophical distinctions such as those between realists and anti-realists, naturalists and anti-naturalists. As A. W. Moore points out, the continental tradition, working in the shadows of Kant's Copernican turn, has been, at least historically, less inclined to align philosophy with the natural sciences, and more predisposed towards distinguishing between the first-order level of the special sciences and the second-order level of philosophical reflection. But apparent differences and similarities between the two traditions should be handled with care, for the devil, as the saying goes, is always in the detail. Much as one should not infer from the phenomenological slogan 'to the things themselves' that continental phenomenologists are consorting with analytic metaphysicians in advocating constructive theories about the nature of reality, one should also be wary of inferring from the influence the Copernican turn has exercised on the continental tradition that all continental philosophers endorse a robust distinction between empirical and transcendental levels of analysis. The naturalizing movement, as Petit's paper shows, is in no way the preserve of the analytic tradition. As membership to a common tradition (be it analytic or continental) is not necessarily indicative of genuine philosophical affinities, the absence of a common tradition does not rule out the existence of genuine methodological affinities. Phenomenology may make explicit the structures of experience rather than the rules of language, say, but phenomenologists and conceptual analysts are endeavouring to expose underlying structures (be they existential or linguistic) which are in some sense 'always already' implicitly known. Examining philosophical methodology on both sides of the analytic/continental divide – as well as paying attention to

methodological questions in those parts of philosophy that do not fit neatly into either camp – may enable us to gain a new perspective on an old and arguably problematic distinction.

## NOTES

- 1 For examples of the former, see (Petitot *et al.* 1999) and the papers collected in (Noë 2007), a special issue of the then-recently founded journal *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*. Parts of the so-called speculative realist movement in recent European philosophy exemplify the latter, although it is probably too soon to attempt to form any clear picture – let alone gauge the philosophical merits – of this very heterogeneous movement. See (Zahavi 2016) for critical discussion.
- 2 In fact, Williamson questions whether the centipede effect even applies in the latter case: ‘the best cyclists surely *do* think about what they are doing’ (Williamson 2007: 8).
- 3 P. F. Strawson relates that Oxford philosophers in the 1940s and 50s, armed with the method of linguistic analysis, would ‘speculate about how long it would take to “finish off” traditional philosophy’ (Strawson 2011: 72).
- 4 Consequently, Popper declares that he, for one, ‘should not bother much about’ such questions as what philosophers ‘are doing or might do’ (Popper 1968: 68).
- 5 Glock and Williamson reject the term ‘metaphilosophy’ for this reason, as does Stanley Cavell: ‘If I deny a distinction, it is the still fashionable distinction between philosophy and meta-philosophy, the philosophy of philosophy. The remarks I make *about* philosophy ... are ... nothing more or less than philosophical remarks’ (Cavell 2002: xxxii). Apparently, the term ‘meta-philosophy’ was coined by Morris Lazerowitz – a student of Wittgenstein – in 1940 (Lazerowitz 1970: 91).
- 6 (Overgaard, Gilbert and Burwood 2013: Ch. 1) suggest that the three central ‘metaphilosophical’ questions are the ‘What’, ‘How’, and ‘Why’ questions.