Armchair v. Laboratory

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Intuition, Imagination and Philosophical Methodology
by Tamar Szabó Gendler.
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'Blessed is he whose mind had power to probe/The causes of things,' Virgil wrote, thinking of Lucretius. But for many, knowing the causal origins of things can be reason for anxiety. Just as we might worry that tracing our family trees will turn up slave owners or madmen, we might also worry that genealogical investigation into our most cherished beliefs, values and practices will reveal what Nietzsche called *pudenda origo*, a shameful origin. We might even feel, in the light of our new knowledge, that we should try to abandon those beliefs, values and practices. The worry that origins will turn out to be shameful rather than noble, a source of discredit not vindication, might be called 'genealogical anxiety'.

Thus while many philosophers – Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke and Hegel among them – believed that genealogical accounts could both elucidate and justify, for example, the existence of the state or the reliability of human reason, Nietzsche perceived a more corrosive dimension to genealogical thinking. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he argued that the origins of modern morality – including, among other things, our commitment to equality, justice and rights – lie in a crafty 'slave revolt' perpetrated by the weak and disenfranchised against the strong and admirable. This revelation played a crucial (if somewhat opaque) role in motivating his vision of a new, post-Christian morality. Nietzsche's innovation prompted a huge cultural shift towards subversive genealogical thinking – what might be called the 'Genealogical Turn' – including Freudian analysis, 20th-century Marxism, Foucault's historical epistemology, certain strands of postcolonial and feminist theory, and much of what goes by the label 'postmodernism'. These ideological programmes operate by purporting to unmask the shameful origins – in violence, sexual repression, gender or racial hegemony and economic and social oppression – of our concepts, beliefs and political structures.

Despite all this, contemporary philosophy in the analytic tradition has seemed mostly untouched by genealogical anxiety. In the early 20th century, logical positivists took pains to point out that such thinking was undermined by the 'genetic fallacy': the mistaken assumption that 'bad' origins necessarily make for false beliefs

or illegitimate practices. Obviously, a bad origin can result in a true belief. I might believe that the world will be destroyed by steadily rising temperatures because a lunatic told me so, but that doesn't mean that climate change is not real. Somewhat less obviously, a practice might have a bad origin but be morally valuable. For example, the legalisation and dissemination of birth control has its origins in Marie Stopes's eugenicist fantasies, but is thought by most to be a very good thing. This is not to say that origins are irrelevant to issues of value, truth or justification: finding out that you were on a hallucinogenic drug when you formed the belief that a goat ate your computer should certainly give you pause. But it is to suggest that the relationship between origins on one hand, and truth, justification and value on the other, is not nearly as straightforward as many proponents of the Genealogical Turn seem to think.

Nonetheless, sloppy genealogical reasoning has become a commonplace both in academic circles and in the wider culture. It has become standard dialectical form to rebut a claim with 'you only believe that because . . .', as if simply unmasking the origins of an opponent's belief were sufficient to debunk it. This is unfortunate because, after all, we believe everything we do because of various background facts and factors; thinking carefully about genealogy requires sorting out when and why these things matter. While not all genealogical critiques offend against these requirements, many do, and this has provided analytic philosophers with an easy excuse for ignoring them.

This in turn goes some way towards explaining analytic philosophy's growing isolation within the humanities. From the perspective of many, philosophy's failure to recognise itself as a contingent product of culture and history makes the discipline seem precious and antiquated at best, dogmatic at worst. At the same time, philosophy has increasingly aligned itself with the natural sciences, which share its confidence in the pursuit of objective truth. Of course, the close relationship between philosophy and the sciences is nothing new, and while (like most long-standing relationships) it is not without its tensions and occasional recriminations, it is mostly amicable. A long philosophical tradition, including Aristotle, Hume, Locke and their numerous successors, concerns itself with thinking through the implications of a broadly scientific picture of the world and mind, and reconciling that picture with what Wilfrid Sellars called the 'manifest image', the way the world appears to us in everyday experience. Philosophers of science take scientific investigation as a model of rationality, and try to make sense of the metaphysical implications of theories in physics and biology. More recently, philosophers of mind have used the empirical findings of the cognitive sciences – especially neuroscience and social, developmental and evolutionary psychology – to formulate and revise claims about the workings of perception and the organisation of mental structure.

There is, however, a growing belief in some corners that the cognitive sciences are making philosophy irrelevant. This is

not simply because the cognitive sciences are increasingly busying themselves with topics – such as morality, free will and religion – that are traditionally regarded as philosophical territory. It is also because the cognitive sciences are being used to launch a methodological attack on philosophy's traditional thought-experimental method. This, simply put, involves considering hypothetical scenarios in order to elicit in oneself (or an interlocutor) 'intuitive judgments', and then attempting to fit these intuitions into an elegant explanatory theory. In a manner that bears a striking resemblance to Nietzsche's attack on morality, some sceptics (often going by the name of 'experimental philosophers') are using empirical methods to suggest that our philosophical intuitions are mere genealogical quirks, whose origins lie in social and cultural contexts, evolution and neurophysiology. For example, Jonathan Weinberg, Shaun Nichols and Stephen Stich argue that people's judgments about what constitutes knowledge – a central question in analytic philosophy – depend on whether they are 'East Asian' or 'Western'. And research by Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols suggests that people's judgments about the relationship between determinism and moral responsibility are susceptible to what psychologists call 'affect'. When asked, in the abstract, whether a person who lives in a deterministic world is morally responsible for his actions, subjects tend to say not. However, when they are presented with the case of Bill, who lives in a deterministic world and murders his wife and children in order to be with his secretary, subjects overwhelmingly judge that Bill is, indeed, morally responsible for his actions. Results of this kind, the sceptics argue, discredit traditional philosophical methodology: it is time for the laboratory to replace the armchair.

In response to this challenge, analytic philosophers typically respond in one of two ways. Either they succumb to genealogical anxiety and throw in their lot with the sceptics, or (more often) they ignore the challenge and carry on with armchair business as usual. Both responses, the defeatist and the reactionary, are intellectually lazy. And both fail to see what many philosophers have failed to see since Nietzsche: that genealogical anxiety is neither a sign of the apocalypse nor a distraction to be dismissed, but rather an invitation to do more philosophy. To make sense of the data produced by cognitive scientists, we need the conceptual refinements and subtle distinctions that are the meat and potatoes of analytic philosophy. Moreover, to draw out the philosophical implications of the cognitive sciences (not least for the legitimacy of philosophical methodology), we must return to central philosophical questions about the relationship of mind to world, knowledge and justification, and the nature of value. While it would be foolish to think that philosophy can ignore the laboratory, it would be just as foolish to think that the cognitive sciences can get by without the armchair.

Tamar Szabó Gendler, who is chair of the philosophy department and a former chair of the cognitive science programme at Yale, sees her two disciplines as mutually reinforcing, in the self-declared spirit of Aristotle and Hume. The cognitive sciences,

she argues, shed light not only on various first-order questions in philosophy (especially those in philosophy of mind and action), but also on how traditional armchair philosophy, *pace* the sceptics, can lead us to knowledge. In turn, she demonstrates how philosophy enables us to make sense of results in the cognitive sciences, giving us a better understanding of mental life.

Intuition, Imagination and Philosophical Methodology is divided into two parts: the first collects Gendler's various essays on methodology, the second her work in the philosophy of mind. A central question in the first part of the book is: why should philosophers hope to learn anything about the world simply by conducting thought experiments? Are these hypothetical imaginings merely a rhetorical device, or do they have genuine epistemological significance – that is to say, the capacity to produce knowledge? Gendler's account dwells on the role of thought experiments in the natural sciences, and pays particular attention to Galileo's refutation of the Aristotelian theory that heavy bodies fall faster than lighter ones. In Galileo's thought experiment, a heavy object and a light object are strapped together and dropped from a height. The Aristotelian theorist is forced to make two conflicting predictions: first, that the rate at which the strapped object falls will be somewhere between the rates at which the two independent objects fall; and, second, that since the strapped object is heavier than either of its constituents, it will fall faster than either of the independent objects. To avoid this contradiction, it appears that he must reject his theory that the speed at which bodies fall is proportional to their weight.

But is that necessarily so? As Gendler points out, the Aristotelian could, in principle, reject any number of his theoretical commitments to get out of the contradiction. For example, he could deny that strapped 'objects' are really objects at all, and insist that only 'real' objects are governed by his theory. But he won't do this, Gendler argues, because the nature of the thought experiment is such that it triggers his tacit knowledge that strapped objects (for the purposes of the laws of physics) are indeed objects. Since our tacit knowledge of the world is often in conflict with our explicit theoretical commitments, abstract argument is often insufficient to bring it to the fore. Thought experiments, by focusing the imagination on specific cases, have a unique capacity to reveal such tacit knowledge.

That said, Gendler seems torn between the claim that thought experiments reveal pre-existing knowledge, and the distinct claim that thought experiments create new knowledge by conferring justification on beliefs. Furthermore, she admits she has little to say on the matter of how thought experiments might operate as a source of epistemic justification, apart from hypothesising that we have some prima facie right to trust the intuitive 'seemings' elicited by such experiments – in the same way that we have, presumably, a prima facie right to trust our senses. As such, her defence of thought experiments might be only partly satisfying to readers who are already sceptical of philosophical methodology.

Nonetheless, by drawing an explicit connection between the use of thought experiments both in philosophy and in the sciences, Gendler reminds us that a hasty critique of philosophical methodology will threaten the foundations of empirical science as well. A naive attack on philosophical reasoning from the standpoint of the sciences presupposes a line between the armchair and the laboratory that cannot cleanly be drawn.

This is not to say that Gendler is entirely sanguine about armchair methods. In 'Philosophical Thought Experiments, Intuitions and Cognitive Equilibrium', she discusses the methodological implications of the fact that our intuitive judgments about hypothetical cases vary with the presentation of those cases, as in the study of free will and determinism I mentioned earlier. Gendler argues that this is best explained in terms of dual-processing: we might employ two different psychological processes for evaluating the same subject matter (for example, whether or not an agent is morally responsible), each one triggered by different conditions, and each delivering a distinct answer. As such, the thought experiment method can be expected, in some cases, to leave us in a state of cognitive disequilibrium, with two conflicting intuitions about the same question. While Gendler doesn't attempt a normative judgment as to how we ought to proceed in such cases, she does note that the problem isn't really new (as many critics of the armchair appear to think). Indeed, this phenomenon is an essential precondition of philosophical persuasion. Philosophers aren't merely executors of reason who seek to systematise their intuitive judgments. Rather, they are often engaged in changing those judgments. Gendler discusses John Rawls's famous 'original position', a hypothetical scenario in which rational agents decide how they will organise their society from behind a 'veil of ignorance' that prevents them from knowing their future role in that society. The power of the 'original position', she argues, is that it gives us a framework for reconceptualising questions about fairness and justice. Here, the point isn't whether or not science discredits philosophical methodology: the example of Rawls shows that philosophy is, at its best, an art.

In the second part of the book, Gendler includes several rich empirical essays on the workings and interrelations of imagination, pretence, belief and self-deception. Also reprinted here are her two essays on 'alief', a concept she introduced to characterise a wide range of psychological phenomena in which our explicit beliefs seem to conflict with our behaviour. Imagine a person standing on a large walkway made of glass, suspended high above the ground; although he knows he is safe, he trembles with fear nonetheless. Or take the subjects of a psychology experiment who refuse to drink orange juice out of bedpans they know to be new and sterile. Or the well documented phenomenon of 'aversive racism', in which Caucasian subjects who explicitly and sincerely declare themselves believers in racial equality systematically display racist behaviour under test conditions, for example by being quicker to match images of black people with negative words, or being

less likely to grant an interview to someone with a stereotypically African American name than to someone with an 'English' name though their CVs are otherwise identical. How should we interpret this phenomenon? One option is to say that these subjects do not believe what they claim to believe; in fact, they believe that they are going to fall, or that the orange juice is contaminated, or that black people are inferior. Another option is to conclude that we are capable of holding conflicting beliefs: we can believe the glass walkway is both safe and unsafe, and can be both egalitarians and bigots. But Gendler suggests instead that these automatic behavioural responses are caused by a distinct cognitive state: alief, as distinct from belief. To have an alief is to have an 'innate or habitual propensity to respond to an apparent stimulus in a particular way'. Aliefs typically operate without the intervention of conscious thought and are therefore not directly susceptible to rational control (though Gendler presents some strategies for bringing one's aliefs into accordance with one's beliefs, which is of particular importance in cases of biased aliefs). She also explains how aliefs help us to make sense of such phenomena as the pleasure we take in horror films; while it can be a source of worry, the discord between our beliefs and aliefs can also enrich human experience.

In some ways, the concept of alief doesn't add much to our theorising about cognition. Many psychologists will think the phenomenon already adequately identified under the rubric of associatively activated representations, and Gendler herself thinks that explanations in terms of alief are compatible with those based on such familiar concepts as instinct, habit, imagining and hypocrisy. But what is both useful and provocative about alief is that it invites, not least by its name, comparisons and contrasts with the phenomenon of belief. The orthodox philosophical view is that belief is a mental state that aims at the truth and is responsive to evidence and argument; the possibility of rationality turns on this conception. However, if our superstitions, biases and some of our automatic responses are beliefs – beliefs which are generally unresponsive to evidence and argument – then the orthodox view of belief, and the possibility of rationality, is threatened. By making a distinction between alief and belief, even if it amounts to nothing more than a useful bit of folk psychology, Gendler is able to capture the intuition that there is something belief-like about these automatic responses, while preserving the possibility of rational deliberation.

Despite Gendler's optimism about the prospect of mutually reinforcing knowledge and understanding, the perspectives of philosophy and the cognitive sciences on the human subject are, in some ways, fundamentally different. Philosophy presupposes rational agents who are responsive to argumentation and evidence; the cognitive sciences increasingly suggest that we might not fit that description, at least not to the extent that philosophers would like. Gendler encourages us to accept 'our fate as embodied beings capable of rational reflection living in an imperfect world'. By urging us to view ourselves not only as the objects of empir-

ical enquiry, but also as the subjects of reason and understanding, she issues once again the invitation to do more philosophy. □