

On Evidence in Philosophy BY WILLIAM LYCAN

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I always want to read a book that not only shows how contemporary philosophers actually do philosophy but also argues how we should do philosophy. Lycan claims that he has written such a book. Like Lycan's other writings, this book is engagingly written and clearly argued. I enjoyed it very much and would highly recommend it to those who are interested in the relevant topics.

Lycan argues that the goal of philosophy is to achieve reflective equilibrium, not any kind of reflective equilibrium, but the kind of reflective equilibrium where a philosophical theory best explains the data that is common sense, science and our firmest intuitions. In what follows, I will first summarize Lycan's major argument for this claim. Then, I will briefly explain how each chapter of the book contributes to the argument. Finally, I will offer an alternative picture of philosophy. If this alternative picture is plausible, then Lycan's picture is at least incomplete.

According to Lycan, while we cannot know which philosophical theory is true, we can be justified in believing certain philosophical theories. Specifically, we are justified in believing a philosophical theory T (at a certain time) iff T is supported by our total evidence (at that time). What may we use as evidence in philosophy? According to Lycan, there are three kinds of evidence: (i) common sense, 'in a carefully restricted sense of the term – the sorts of contingent

propositions that Moore employs to argue against idealism and skepticism' (1), for example 'Here is one hand ...', 'I had my breakfast before I had lunch' etc. (ii) Science, especially the deliverances of the "hard" physical and basic biological sciences – at least, whatever is well confirmed and fairly uncontroversial within the relevant field' (1–2). (iii) Intuitions, in a carefully restricted sense of the term – intellectual seemings about cases (rather than theories), 'actual or hypothetical – Gettier examples, moral situations, inferences, etc.' (96). Lycan notes three things: (i) All the three kinds of evidence in philosophy are fallible or defeasible; (ii) Intuitions are the most important evidence in philosophy because common sense and science are 'philosophically pretty quiet' (3): they have no bearings on value theory and many metaphysical and epistemological positions (though they are incompatible with some philosophical theories such as solipsism and other forms of eliminativist idealism); and (iii) The more widely shared an intuition is, the more justifying power it has. If no one else shares your intuition, then it has negligible justifying power.

Why are common sense, science and intuitions evidence? What is so great about them? Lycan agrees with David Armstrong that we should judge an epistemic method by its power of producing consensus over time. Science and common sense (in the sense specified by Lycan) are the least controversial things. Appealing to them would help produce consensus over time. Thus, they are evidence in philosophy. For the same reason, Lycan claims that the more widely shared an intuition is, the more justifying power it has. But many intuitions are controversial. People from different social or cultural backgrounds often have different intuitions about a certain case. Lycan does not claim that if an intuition is controversial, then it cannot be used as evidence in philosophy. Rather, he thinks that if an intuition is shared by many people (though controversial), it can be used as evidence (though not very strong evidence). Why? Lycan defends intuitions as evidence in terms of the Principle of Credulity, of which he offers different formulations. One formulation states 'accept at the outset each of those things that seems to be true' (112). Another states that 'appearances are innocent until at least some slight reason is given for suspecting them guilty' (114). Now intuitions are seemings-true. Therefore, they are evidence by the Principle of Credulity. But why is

this principle true? Lycan claims that the principle is a consequence of conservatism: We should privilege what we already believe. (Below I will explain why Lycan thinks conservativeness is a virtue.)

Now how does the evidence support a philosophical theory? Lycan argues for a form of explanatory coherentism, which states that a theory is supported by a body of evidence iff it coheres with the evidence. Coherence is an explanatory relation. A theory coheres with a body of evidence iff it explains the evidence, which is the data to be explained. Put together, Lycan holds that we are justified in believing a philosophical theory T iff T explains common sense, science and intuitions.

Lycan does not discuss the nature of explanation. But he explores the question 'What constitutes a better explanation?'. In science, Lycan notes, a theory T1 is better than another theory T2 if T1 is simpler than T2, or T1 explains more than T2, or T1 is more readily testable than T2, or T1 is less at odds with what we already reasonably believe than T2 etc. Philosophy is different from science, but some properties of a good scientific explanation are also virtues of a philosophical theory. Lycan names three of them: conservatism, simplicity and (explanatory) power. He discusses only the first two, for he says in a footnote that power is just a higher-order manifestation of simplicity. Conservatism states that T1 should be preferred to T2 if T1 fits better with what we already believe. Lycan does not offer any criteria of simplicity. He thinks that the idea that simplicity is a virtue is best illustrated by the standard example of experimental scientists' practice in curve fitting on graphs: if scientists can draw a straight line through a certain set of data points, they would not draw any more complicated curve. Lycan notes there are many different types and respects of simplicity, which overlap and cut across each other, often conflicting; there are no set rules for resolving such conflicts. Partly because of this, two people endorsing different explanations might be both justified, and both achieve reflective equilibrium.

Why are conservatism and simplicity virtues? Lycan defends conservatism by merely saying that 'whatever epistemic or justifying status inheres in the other standard pragmatic theoretical virtues – simplicity, testability, fruitfulness, power, and the like – conservativeness shares that same status' (113). (He does list some

references to a detailed defence, e.g. his 1988 book *Judgement and Justification*). Regarding simplicity, Lycan briefly discusses a popular objection, viz., a simpler theory is not more likely to be true. Lycan responds that this objection presupposes that truth is the only goal of cognition. But this presupposition is false, because another goal of cognition is to acquire beliefs that can guide our action in an efficient way, and pragmatic virtues can contribute to overall cognitive goodness by making cognition efficient. Lycan does not develop the argument in this book, though he mentions that his 1988 book offers an argument at some length. In addition, Lycan suggests that the normative preference for simplicity is epistemologically basic: 'It does not admit of justification by something allegedly more basic' (120).

So far, I have summarized the picture of philosophy Lycan's book offers. How does each chapter contribute to this picture? Chapters 1 and 2 offer an interpretation of how Moore uses common sense as evidence and defend Moore's method against various objections. Chapters 3 and 4 apply Lycan's particular version of Moore's method to two philosophical issues: eliminativism in the philosophy of mind and the free-will debate. Chapter 5 argues that contrary to popular belief, the case against Cartesian dualism is rather weak. Chapter 6 discusses the possibility of philosophical knowledge. It argues that Gary Gutting has exaggerated what philosophy can achieve and that the only significant philosophical knowledge we have achieved is recognizing certain possible positions. While Chapters 5 and 6 are interesting, it is unclear how they contribute to Lycan's explanatory coherentist picture. Perhaps Lycan's point is that Chapters 5 and 6 show that we cannot hope to achieve something more than reflective equilibrium in philosophy. Chapter 7 addresses the questions of what an intuition is and why intuitions can justify theses based on them. Chapter 8 responds to a few standard objections to explanatory coherentism.

Due to limited space, I cannot give a detailed evaluation of Lycan's picture of philosophy. But I'd like to present an alternative picture offered by Russell: 'My desire and wish is that the things I start with should be so obvious that you wonder why I spend my time stating them. This is what I aim at because the point of philosophy is to start

with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it' (Russell, 2010: 20). This method has been employed by many philosophers since Socrates (Lycan claims that arguments produced by this method are rare. I disagree: there are many such philosophical arguments). It does not concern whether people are unjustified in believing certain philosophical theories. What matters is to help people see the consequences of their beliefs, especially to see the inconsistencies in their belief system. In this way, people understand their belief system better. On this picture, the goal of philosophy is to understand our belief system better, not to acquire knowledge or justified belief. For Lycan, however, the goal of philosophy is to acquire justified belief in the form of reflective equilibrium.

Reference

Russell B. 2010. *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*. Abingdon: Routledge.

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