John Wilson on Philosophy

(All passages are from John Wilson, *Thinking with Concepts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963.)

"[T]he concept of philosophy is . . . a puzzling concept and one which is very much in dispute at the present time. . . . [I]t includes far more than our techniques [*sc.* of conceptual analysis]. It includes, to name but one activity, the giving of general advice on how to live one's life (such as might be offered by a 'guide, philosopher and friend'): and this is no part of our task [*sc.* of analysing concepts]. Certainly our techniques are widely and effectively used amongst modern philosophers, particularly in England and America: there is every reason to think them very important for philosophy in any sense of the word, and even to believe that anyone who wants to study philosophy should begin by mastering them. But to describe the techniques briefly as 'elementary philosophy' would be trying to gain an unfair monopoly of the concept of philosophy" (50 f.).

"One view [*sc.* of the business of philosophy], perhaps still the most popular, is that philosophy is directly and immediately concerned with a way of life and with the truth about reality. It has to do with what people are, what they do, and what they feel: with their behaviour, their emotions, their beliefs and moral judgments. By this account a man's philosdophy is a sort of blend between his motives, his behaviour, and his values. . . . Philosophy as a whole makes a living, on this theory, by outlining various philosophies and attempting to judge between them. . . .[D]ifferent philosophers will criticise different ways of life, and the individual reads them and then chooses for himself. This is still perhaps the most common view of philosophy. . . .

"The objection to this picture is that it makes of the philosopher no more than the manager of an art gallery in which paintings of different ways of life are displayed, held up to the light, criticised, valued, and finally bought. The philosopher exhibits these, explains them, assesses them, and so forth. People buy what suits them. There appears to be no real place for *rational* assessment, no criteria by which one painting may be firmly judged better than another. Various alternative choices are offered. . . . All this may be amusing, and may improve mutual tolerance: but it signally fails to satisfy the intense demand for truth, the need to know as exactly as possible what is so and what is not so, and the desire for some effective tool or method by which to judge, all of which are as common in the twentieth century as they ever were.

"The second view, which is still practised if not preached by the modern linguistic philosophers of Oxbridge, is a sharp and radical reaction from the first. On this view the philosopher has no *direct* connection with ways of life, motives, behaviour or values at all. He is an analyst of language, concerned with the verification and meaning of statements and with the logical use of words. The philosopher is not interested in what people think about life (much less how they choose to behave), but only in the words in which they express their thoughts. Do statements about God have meaning? Is the notion of truth applicable to moral judgements? What is meant by saying that a man acts freely? These are

linguistic questions, which turn on the use of words like 'meaning,' 'truth,' 'freely,' and so forth.

"Plainly such radicalism has a lot to be said for it. . . . Plainly there is little point in discussing what is right and wrong unless we know what is meant by the words 'right' and 'wrong': and so with all questions. . . .

"But as a complete programme for philosophy this will not do. It will not do primarily because language is not an abstract activity, but a form of life. It is something used by people; and not only this, but something much more close to people, much more *a part of them*, than most linguistic philosophers suppose. A man's language is *only a symptom* of his conceptual equipment, just as his neurotic behaviour-patterns are only symptoms of his inner psychic state. The phrase 'conceptual equipment' covers far more ground than language: though the analysis of language is one way—and a good way—of investigating conceptual equipment. To discover the stance in which a man faces the world, and to make him conscious of it so that he can change it, one good method is to see how he talks and make him conscious of his language.

"Yet words represent only one part of the equipment with which people face life. When we say, for instance, 'He sees life differently from the way I see it,' we do not mean *either* (as the first view claims) that he has a different way of life from me, that his behaviour-patterns, motives, and values are different, *or* (according to the second view) just that he makes different sorts of statements from the ones I make, that he uses language differently. Of course both these may be true, and probably will be true: yet this is not what we mean when we say 'He sees life differently.' We mean that his conceptual equipment is different. It is as if we said, as we frequently do, 'He speaks a different language,' using this sentence metaphorically, or 'It's no good, we don't speak the same language.' Here we are, significantly and interestingly, extending the notion of language to cover far more than the spoken symbols of words: we refer to the whole pattern of thought, the categories, concepts and modes of thinking, which lie behind both the man's way of life and his actual spoken words.

"Of all the beings we know, man alone is capable of entertaining the notion of meaning. This is to say that man has experiences in a different sense from that in which we might say, if we wished, that animals or inanimate objects have experiences. . . . Man has the freedom to attach, within limits circumscribed by his own nature, whatever force or weight to his experiences he likes: the freedom to give them meaning.

"If we give the concept of meaning or interpretation a wide sense, we see that it enters into all activities or occurrences of which we are at any time conscious. . . .[W]hether we choose to lie in the sun, to watch a blue and sparkling sea, to make love, to read a novel, to order a particular wine, to buy a particular car or even to smoke one more cigarette, our choices are very obviously governed by the weight or force which these happenings have for our minds: and this is to say, in a sense, that they are governed by our own interpretation or evaluation of them. . . .

"Many of our interpretations are, no doubt, in some sense forced upon us. We grow up in a world in which, for the sake of survival, we are forced to attach a certain weight to food, warmth, physical objects, and so on: and thereby we uncritically create and accept a framework of interpretation which, for the most part, stays with us for the rest of our lives. Events happen to us in early

childhood which unconsciously exercise power over the conscious activities of our later lives, by forcing upon us certain interpretations and evaluations. . . . Later we acquire, more or less consciously, a framework of attitudes and values towards all the aspects of human life that we meet: to men, women, children and all the roles that these may play (fathers, sisters, lovers, etc,), to money and posessions, to nature, to our own role in society, to music and literature and the arts, to science, mathematics, philosophy and all the other disciplines of mankind. This framework is our conceptual equipment.

"To describe conceptual equipment, to expand the meaning of the phrase, is not easy. One can use many metaphors, each as good or as bad as any other, to give a general idea of what we are talking about. At any particular period of his life, each man faces himself and the world by adopting a certain posture, a certain stance towards it. . . .Or else we shall say that he faces things with a certain set of tools: the incisive, straightforward tool-kit of the physicist, the less informative but deeper probes and sounders of psychoanalysis, etc. Or else we shall say that he sees through different sets of spectacles. . . .Or else we shall say that he speaks certain languages and understands them. . . . Or else we say, finally, that he has the skill to play a certain number of games in life. . . .

"Of these metaphors perhaps the most productive is that of a game. Almost all human behaviour, and all behavioiur which has any claim to be in any sense rational, is artificial. Consciously or unconsciously, people obey or try to obey certain rules. These may be rules of procedure, as in a law-court: rules of convention, as in personal relationships at a casual level: rules of reasoning, as in logic or the study of some specific subject: rules of behaviour in their moral lives: rules of language in ordinary communication, and so forth. . . . We can describe, and fruitfully, people who fail in one way or another as failing because of *lack of skill*. . . . A final example from a field which is more obviously connected with our present conception of philosophy: people who reject religion *in toto* often do so because, as it were, they cannot find their way around the conceptual landscape of religion. The concepts and experiences of religion (like those of poetry or music) form a game which it takes skill, practice and study to play.

"To produce a rough approximation: the business of philosophy is to make people conscious of the rules of these games. For unless they are conscious of them, they will be unable to play them better, and also unable to see which new games they want to learn to play, and which old games they want to continue to play or to discard. With certain games, the logic of which is fairly simple, philosophy has already succeeded. The rules or principles by which one does science, or mathematics, or formal logic, are now fairly clearly established: and this is partly why these studies have prospered. Other games present more difficulty. How, for instance, does one decide about moral problems, or problems of personal relationships? How is one to assess works of art? How is one to decide whether to have a religion, and which one to have? In all these cases, the philosopher's business is neither (as the first view holds) simply to put forward a moral view, a view about personal relationships, a theory of aesthetics or religion, and compare it with other views, leaving the individual to choose for himself—for on what criteria can he choose?—nor (the second view) simply to analyse the language of morals, aesthetics and religion, for this alone does not clarify the rules of the games with sufficient depth. His business is, first and foremost, to make clear how the games are in fact played: to clarify *what it is* to

settle a moral issue, *what it is* to have a religion, *what it is* to love or be friends with someone, in the same way as we are now clear about what it is to do science or mathematics.

"What kind of process is this clarification? To use the example of science: . . . we might feel that the clarification of the science-game was actually very simple. . . . But in fact and in history, it took humanity till the Renaissance to gain a clear idea of this game. . . . This sort of change [*sc.* from one view of the world to another] has various aspects to it. Depth psychologists . . . have given a clear account of its psychological nature. . . . But it has also an important *conceptual* aspect; and it is this which is the business of philosophy. It is not just a question of how we feel about the world and ourselves: it is a question of *in what terms we conceive them*. This is something which is amenable to rational discussion, in which we may become more conscious of our own concepts, our own language, our own pictures of the world, and hence learn to change them. All of us are largely unaware of the conceptual principles by which we work: we have, in this century, a reasonably firm grasp of the world of sense-experience, and feel at home with science. But with morals, religion, literature and the arts, and above all in personal relationships we feel lost and bewildered (unless we are already so blind that we think there is nothing to see). Neither of the two views I have criticised earlier cater[s] adequately for this blindness or bewilderment. It is inept to say that we must just try harder or behave better or follow more sensible ways of life: and it is inadequate to say that we must scrutinise our language and become more clever about the logic of words. For our difficulties do not arise either because we are not good or virtuous enough, or because we are not clever enough. They arise because we feel *lost*, out of our depth, groping, trying to learn how to play the various games of life. It is the same sort of feeling that one might have when about to step on to the dance floor without knowing how to dance: one doesn't know how to start.

"Philosophy, then, is clarification of *method*, of the way in which these games are played. . . . [T]here are hundreds of questions in life, which . . . arise because we are trying to play games without being clear about the rules. . . . [O]rdinary people are puzzled by parts of their lives in precisely the same *kind* of way [*sc.* in which professional philosophers are puzzled by the so-called classical metaphysical questions], a way which necessitates education in self-consciousness, in awareness of how they are in fact facing the world and themselves, in overhauling their conceptual equipment. It is this process which I have described as philosophy" (126-138).

"[T]he philosopher should be familiar with, and sympathetic to, all the major fields which relate directly to human concepts: all the studies and forms of creation which can teach, influence, or otherwise affect our conceptual equipment. Obvious candidates for study are: literature (particularly the novel and drama), music, psychology, the social sciences and history. All these bear directly—and, for most people, much more effectively than philosophy—on our conceptual equipment: on our stance towards life, the spectacles we wear, the game-playing skills we have, the tools we use, the pictures we form. . . . Even though the arts do not assert facts, they still teach us—and teach us rationally. It is this kind of rational teaching that philosophy needs to include within its ambience. In so far as rational discussion takes place in words, the basic and

essential part of the philosopher's tool-kit will, of course, be linguistic. But there will be other tools: instead of merely being able to analyse statements, he will learn to relate them to the general world-pictures and the conceptual equipment as a whole of individuals.

"This process of philosophy is, of course, itself a game: and a particularly difficult one to play. It is as if philosophy had to move up to a higher storey and watch the people on the ground-floor playing their various games with more or less success, and then assess and criticise their rules; or as if one were presented with a compendium of games in a box, like a Christmas present, only the rules had been left out—one has to try and work out what the games are, how they should be played, and whether they are worth playing at all. All this makes the most stringent demands: a demand for logical rogour, so that the game of philosophy should be purposive and not a mere art-gallery comparison of different concepts, and yet also a demand for breadth of understanding, so that we can keep good communications with all the games that actually exist. Yet the importance of philosophy, at any level of life and in any context, is obvious: for without this process of becoming more aware, more conscious of the rules, it is perhaps impossible to assess or make any deliberate rational change in one's life. Certainly we may change, and live, without philosophy, just as we may without common sense, or without some of the five senses. But we cannot do so effectively. We desperately need a technique to handle the problems involved; and it may be possible, without much further research, for the first time to establish such a technique on a firm footing. For at least we recognize the fields of activity involved—literature, the arts, social science, and so forth—and can begin to think about the methods of each, and the way in which they bear upon the problems of life. We may yet live to see the philosopher really earning his keep" (138-140).

"The analysis of concepts . . . emerges as only one tool in the philosopher's equipment: but a very necessary tool, because it is a very good way of generating consciousness. One thing, at least, everyone can always do: he can always say 'What does that mean?' But if he is content with what we may call a purely *logical* analysis, his increase of consciousness, though helpful, will not be as profound as it might be. For meaning goes deeper than usage: it stems from a man's whole conceptual equipment, which itself is rooted in his personality and past experiences. For this reason we have more than a purely verbal landscape to map. . . . [F]or the sake of simplicity at least, we must count philosophy as a different subject from psychology, history, sociology, and so on. But even this is a little misleading. We deceive ourselves if we suppose that these humane studies possess totally separate and discrete subject-matters: it is better to say that there are human problems which can and must be approached both philosophically, psychologically, sociologically and so forth. We need a harmonious team of experts, who are experts in particular methods of approach: not a number of disjoined specialists working in their own studies and laboratories" (140 f.).

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1. Wilson's is what I would call a "rich," or, possibly, "thick," understanding of philosophy as analysis of concepts closely convergent with that of the later Wittgenstein. True, it quite fails to do justice to the first of the two alternative views it criticizes insofar as it fails to allow for philosophy's function (which Wilson, oddly, recognizes [50 f.]!) of giving "general advice on how to live one's life," i.e., what I call philosophy's other critco-constructive function. For that matter, it also quite fails to recognize that, even in carrying out its first, analytic function "the impulse behind [philosophy's] concern with language," as Passmore puts it, "is *metaphysical*, not linguistic." Consequently, it in no way recognizes the possibility and the necessity of a transcendental metaphysics as the fulfilment of philosophy's first function of analyzing concepts and deducing fundamental presuppositions. But, fully allowing for all this, Wilson's understanding meets the main objections to the second alternative view—the Oxbridge view of philosophy as linguistic analysis—while still incorporating its strengths, including, above all, a concern that philosophy, in some way, meet the demand for truth, criteria for rational judgment, and so on.

2. Oddly enough, however, Wilson entitles his book, *Thinking* with *Concepts*, as though, on his own use of terms, there could be any other kind of thinking! Surely, *Thinking* about *Concepts* is the title that more nearly indicates what he in fact means by "analysis of concepts," or "conceptual analysis" (cf. 21; also 139, where he rightly recognizes that philosophy is a "higher storey" activity of watching people on the ground floor play their games, etc.).

3. The other thing that introduces a certain lack of clarity (or consistency) in his understanding of philosophy is his failure to explain adequately what the other tools are, besides conceptual analysis, that the philosopher as such employs in doing her or his bit towards solving "human problems." On the one hand, he seems to hold that what makes philosophy distinctive is precisely its concern with concepts, meaning, and so on; but on the other, he seems unwilling to allow that conceptual analysis (granted that it is more than merely "linguistic analysis") is philosophy's only contribution, or "tool." My guess is that what's missing from his understanding in this respect is clear recognition of the need for something like a philosophical anthropology, distinct from but by no means unrelated to the social sciences. Anyhow, what fails to emerge clearly and consistently from his account is exactly wherein philosophy's distinctive contribution to coping with human problems lies. At no point, for example, does he clearly contrast the historian or social scientist's proper concern with *semantic* meaning of language with the philosopher's proper concern with its *depth* meaning, or (logical) *kind* of meaning, and so on.