

# Christian Nitz

## A New Rationalism?

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### Intuitions, Modal Knowledge, and the Analysis of Concepts

**note of caution / February 2013:** You find here the table of content as well as the introduction to my book as I finished it in 2007. I am presently thoroughly revising the whole manuscript in the light of my own subsequent research (which you find in my papers), and the current debate. Although I have not given up on the general line developed, the following pages will hence give rough but a rough idea of how the finished book will look like.



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# Introduction

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## A Roadmap to Things to Come

Many philosophers do not do as their colleagues in the science, sociology or history departments do. They do not spend their time colliding particles, they do not do surveys in order to ascertain preferences, and they do not help to send little robots to Mars. These philosophers do not employ the advanced, reliable and often instrument-aided ways of acquiring knowledge that dominate the everyday work of physicists or palaeontologists. They don't do fieldwork, and they do not commit themselves to excavations – unless, that is, the fieldwork can be accomplished by creative imagination, and what is excavated is of concern to logic rather than to palaeontology.<sup>1</sup> More worrisome still, these philosophers do not base their philosophical accounts on input from the empirical sciences. They do not draw on the latest empirical insights of biologists, or recent breakthroughs in particle physics, but rather pursue philosophy in a way that is ostensibly independent from and uninformed by the empirical results the sciences deliver. Philosophers of this stripe examine the world from the armchair, as it were.<sup>2</sup> This is a source of widespread bewilderment, irritation and even pity amongst scientists and scientifically minded philosophers alike. Thus the question arises whether philosophers sticking to their armchair ways are right to do so.

It is hopeless to try to answer this question in utter generality. We need to narrow our focus. I will do so in three respects. First of all, I will throughout be concerned with that loosely knit intellectual tradition called 'analytic philosophy' (see Glock 2007). Secondly, I will focus on theoretical philosophy, and not worry about ethics or aesthetics. After all, practical and theoretical philosophy might bear fundamentally different relations to empirical research. Finally, I will exclusively deal with thinkers who conceive of their philosophical undertakings as epistemic, rather than as expressive, therapeutic, pedagogical, or political (see Gill 1982, Diamond 1995). The philosophers I am concerned with aim to obtain knowledge about philosophically

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<sup>1</sup> Do not be misled by titles such as "On Safari with Quine and Wittgenstein" (Glock 1996), or "Frege: Logical Excavations" (Baker/Hacker 1984). No animal was spotted on this safari, and nobody touched a shovel for this excavation.

<sup>2</sup> My talk of 'armchairs' follows the common line. See e.g. Jackson 1994 who talks of 'armchair deliberation' (154) and 'armchair metaphysics' (ibid.), and Williamson 2007 who begins his book with the question "What can be pursued in an armchair?". See 1.1.



significant phenomena such as the mind, knowledge, causation, justification, consciousness, meaning, counterfactuals, properties, colors, parts, space, time, events, artefacts, explanation, free will, and the like. Philosophers of this kind also typically accept Sellars' dictum "The aim of philosophy is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest sense of the term" (Sellars 1963, 1), although they disagree on its precise meaning. Even if we do not read too much into either commitment, they hence pursue what we might call 'metaphysics'.

Given these constraints, we can put the question whether philosophers sticking to their armchair methodology are right to do so thus:

- Can analytic theoretical philosophy<sup>3</sup> be a serious and legitimate epistemic endeavour if it is essentially pursued by armchair means?

Contemporary philosophers take two different stances on this issue. Philosophers harbouring ideas informed by *strict methodological naturalism*<sup>4</sup> such as Kornblith (2002) or Cummins (1998) argue that armchair thinkers are wrong to shun standard scientific method and to proceed largely uninformed about scientific details. They think that armchair philosophy cannot make good on its claim that it is a serious epistemological project, and they insist that the empirical sciences provide our only legitimate approach to devising theories about the mind, knowledge, causation, justification, and the like. Naturalists consider armchair philosophy to be a failed epistemic project rather than a legitimate approach to doing serious philosophy.

Contemporary philosophers with *rationalist*<sup>5</sup> leanings maintain that philosophy can amount to a serious and legitimate epistemic endeavour even if it is pursued by armchair means. This holds true for thinkers such as Lowe (2002) who believe that we can find out about the natures of things as well as their real possibilities by armchair reflection because these reflections allow us to attain modal knowledge. It also holds true for philosophers such as Jackson (1998) whose main focus on language and conceptual analysis puts them close to traditional linguists such as Hanfling (2000). But Jack-

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<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, I will drop the qualification 'analytic theoretical' and speak of 'philosophy'.

<sup>4</sup> Many different stances have been labelled 'naturalism'; just compare Papineau 1994, ch.1, Koethe 1992, 50 and McDowell 1994, lecture 4. I will mostly take 'naturalism' in the less frequent methodological sense, rather than in the more common ontological sense. I will also assume throughout the strict reading of methodological naturalism you find in Cummins 1998 and Kornblith 2002, on which empirical sciences are rather austere empirical. See 3.1.

<sup>5</sup> I use 'rationalism' to designate a systematic stance rather than a historical phenomenon. See Markie 2004, 1, who explains: "Rationalists claim that there are significant ways in which our (...) knowledge [is] gained independently of sense experience".

son and his followers analyse language in order to do metaphysics, whereas traditional linguists analyse language to dissolve metaphysics.

Kim rightly notes that “[i]f current analytic philosophy can be said to have a philosophical ideology, it is, unquestionably, naturalism” (2003, 84). However, even a quick glance at recent literature shows that we are in the midst of a full-blown ‘rationalist renaissance’ (Bealer 2002, 71).<sup>6</sup> This *new rationalism* is ubiquitous in contemporary analytic thought. Many philosophers do explicitly answer the question posed above in the affirmative and openly embrace a rationalist’ agenda. Even more thinkers practise philosophy presupposing that philosophy as a serious epistemic endeavour can be pursued by armchair means. So we do have good reasons to find out whether armchair philosophy can be a legitimate approach to doing serious philosophy (as the rationalists hold), or whether it is nothing but a critically flawed epistemic enterprise (as the naturalists think).

This book takes up this challenge. It does not provide a comprehensive survey of contemporary rationalists’ ideas and arguments, though. My approach is rather more focused. Throughout the book, I will be concerned with a philosophical stance I label ‘armchair rationalism’; for variation, I call it ‘neo-rationalism’ and ‘armchair metaphysics’. Armchair rationalism sums up key commitments of current rationalists. It marks off what thinkers such as Kripke, Lowe, Jackson, and Bealer share, and philosophers such as Stich, Goldman, and Kornblith reject. Armchair rationalism combines three ideas: **(A)** Philosophy can be done by *a priori*<sup>7</sup> means. **(B)** Philosophy done *a priori* can yield or contribute to knowledge of mind-independent<sup>8</sup> matters of fact (*factual knowledge*, for short<sup>9</sup>). **(C)** *A priori* reflection can yield or contribute to factual knowledge because the philosophical intuitions we gather from and justify by reflection on scenarios such as Jackson’s Mary or Gettier’s cases allow us to reliably pass verdict on philosophical theories about knowledge, causation, meaning, and the like.

In short, neo-rationalists take armchair philosophy to be a kind of intuition-driven inquiry, and they think that such an inquiry can work because

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Peacocke 2004, Chalmers 2004, Lowe 2003, Jackson 1998, BonJour 1998. See 1.1.

<sup>7</sup> The term ‘a priori’ taken in a liberal sense I explain in 1.1.

<sup>8</sup> I take a common line here: roughly, something is mind-independent if it is how it is regardless of how we represent things to be. By popular standards, that there are stars, that water is necessarily H<sub>2</sub>O, that some things cause other things, or that the mental supervenes on the physical (assuming that it does) are mind-independent matters of facts; that I now think of Rome, that I now feel ill, or that ‘brother’ applies to male siblings do not so qualify.

<sup>9</sup> I will throughout use ‘factual knowledge’ as an abbreviation for the more cumbersome ‘knowledge of mind-independent matters of fact’.

the method of scenarios and intuitions so prominent in contemporary philosophical debate is reliable. Philosophical intuitions, they hold, are a genuine additional source of evidence. Contemporary rationalism shares its *a priori* ideas and its epistemic goals with a venerable tradition of western rationalism spanning from Plato to Chisholm (see Cottingham 1984, Markie 2004). But in contrast to much traditional rationalism, current rationalists do also rely on empirical evidence in the form of Moorean facts, humdrum empirical truths, household generalities, and the odd scientific insight. More importantly, neo-rationalists rely on the method of scenarios and intuitions. Although there are historical precursors to that, this gives us a good reason to think that armchair rationalism is indeed a *new* rationalism.<sup>10</sup>

I argue that armchair rationalism is right. Philosophy can be a serious and legitimate epistemic endeavour even if it is pursued by armchair means. The case I make comprises a positive and a negative part. In the negative part, I rebut naturalist objections and reject what I call *modal rationalism*.<sup>11</sup> Methodological naturalists maintain that either general naturalist principles, or arguments informed by empirical findings, rule out neo-rationalism. I argue that they do not. Modal rationalists, on the other hand, think that the method of scenarios and intuitions is reliable because *a priori* reflection on scenarios is an autonomous and reliable way to acquire metaphysically modal knowledge. They consider the method of scenarios and intuitions to be a viable epistemic procedure *sui generis*. This claim informs much philosophy currently undertaken in the rationalist spirit. I argue that it fails.

In the positive part of my case, I identify, spell out, and defend a viable variety of armchair rationalism. I call it *conceptual rationalism*. Conceptual rationalism is close to the stance Frank Jackson and David Lewis take. It combines the following three claims:

- Armchair reflection based on the method of scenarios and intuitions is a variety of conceptual analysis.
- This variety of conceptual analysis works. We can reliably ascertain what our terms mean by the method of scenarios and intuitions.

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<sup>10</sup> I will be silent on historical questions. In my view, tracing back neo-rationalism's commitments to traditional rationalism is a valuable project. It is especially rewarding to analyse Descartes' metaphysics in terms of the distinction between modal and epistemic necessity (see chapter 8). But within the confines of this essay, I cannot allot this historical project the space, care and attention it deserves. So rather than doing it in a shallow manner, I leave it for another occasion.

<sup>11</sup> Please do not confuse my modal rationalism, which is a general methodological stance, with Chalmers 2002, 194f, which is a stance on how conceivability and possibility relate.

- The knowledge we gain by conceptual analysis yields factual knowledge since it yields metaphysical necessities, and it contributes to factual knowledge since it allows for reductive explanations.

Taken together, these theses allow us to answer our question in the affirmative: yes, analytic theoretical philosophy can be a serious and legitimate epistemic endeavour even if it is pursued by armchair means. The viability of conceptual rationalism confirms quite a bit of contemporary philosophy manifestly driven by rationalist ideas. Even though armchair philosophers as a rule do not advertise what they do as the pursuit of conceptual analysis, what they do often conforms to conceptual rationalist ideas.

The question I pose and the answer I offer are meta-philosophical – they concern the viability of a certain way of doing philosophy. But my argument is for the most part not a meta-argument. My argument is for the most part an argument in philosophy. I will be concerned with intricate first-order issues in epistemology, semantics, the philosophy of language, and metaphysics. I will also touch upon questions in ontology, the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of science. So, much of what I do should be of interest to those who do not care for armchair rationalism. There is a reason for this. We do not arrive at a sensible stance in meta-philosophy arguing top down from general principle. We arrive at a sensible stance in meta-philosophy arguing bottom-up from the insights we reap from doing epistemology, semantics, metaphysics, and the like. This is what I will do.

There is a drawback to this. I am not talking about the ever-present threat of a circle. Since I won't need the method of by scenarios and intuitions to make my case, I don't fear it much. The drawback of arguing bottom-up is that one needs to be very clear on how the first-order arguments presented bear on the meta-philosophical question pursued. In order to prevent you from losing sight of the general aim by tracing the details of my argument, let me give a – by necessity crude – summary of what happens in the eleven chapters to come. This will familiarize you with the general line of my argument. It will also tell you what to expect.

The first chapter introduces armchair rationalism. I present and discuss the key claims defining what armchair rationalism amounts to, and I explain that its viability hinges on whether or not philosophical intuitions do allow us to reliably pass verdict on philosophical theories. I argue that armchair rationalism – explicitly acknowledged or tacitly presupposed – is ubiquitous in contemporary philosophy, and I maintain that we had better get clear on

its viability. I link this meta-task to first-order debates in semantics and epistemology by arguing that meta-philosophical attitudes are to be justified by means of ordinary philosophical argument.

The second chapter deals with philosophical intuitions. First, I explain what they are. I argue that philosophical intuitions are beliefs. They are those beliefs we are meant to straightforwardly adopt on the basis of hypothetical scenarios, and, more importantly, that are meant to be justified by those. This fits well with prominent cases such as Davidson's swampman. But it runs counter to the popular view held by Bealer, Sosa, and Pust that philosophical intuitions are *sui generis* intellectual seemings. I argue that this view is flawed. Secondly, I explain how philosophical intuitions work. Refining Williamson's proposal, I argue that scenario-based reasoning is a variety of counterfactual thinking. In our reasoning based on the Mary story or the Gettier cases, we rely on a possibility premise ( $\Diamond S$ ) and a subjunctive link ( $S \Box \rightarrow P$ ) to infer a modal upshot ( $\Diamond P$ ). I conclude that *if* we can reliably attain such knowledge by *a priori* means, *then* the method of scenarios and intuitions is a viable epistemic procedure.

The third chapter takes up the challenge from naturalism. Having identified methodological naturalism as the true adversary to armchair rationalism and having pointed out that methodological naturalism does not follow from well-motivated physicalism, I argue that there is no swift and decisive refutation of armchair rationalism from naturalist principles. Naturalists cannot establish that the empirical sciences are to be the sole authoritative guide to any philosophical inquiry without invoking unwarranted methodological assumptions, or risking self-defeat. Naturalists can still try to invalidate neo-rationalism by drawing on methods and findings from the empirical sciences. I discuss three such arguments informed by science – Cummins' *Argument from Calibration*, Stich's *Argument from Cultural Diversity*, and the *Argument from Psychology* put forth by Harman and Goldman. I argue that none of them withstands scrutiny.

Chapter four introduces *modal rationalism* and locates it in modal theory. Modal rationalist hold that the method of scenarios and intuitions is reliable *because a priori* reflection on scenarios is an autonomous as well as reliable way to acquire insight into metaphysical necessity and possibility. Ever since Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, this has been a popular position. Exploring the background, I argue that the logical positivists identification of necessity with apriority has been falsified by Kripkean arguments, I defend *de re* modality against Quinean objections, I explain rigid designation and

its bearing on our issues, and I describe how modal rationalists think metaphysics works. I also argue that we need not to pass verdict on what possible worlds are. Using worlds does not require taking a stance on the dispute between realists, ersatzists, and fictionalists.

In chapter five, I argue that modal rationalism fails. Any neo-rationalism has to satisfy the *relevance condition*. That is to say, it has to explain how the modal knowledge it says we attain by the method of scenarios and intuitions can yield or contribute to factual knowledge. Modal rationalism meets this condition. After all, knowledge of metaphysically modal properties is factual knowledge. Any variety of neo-rationalism has to satisfy the *accessibility constraint*, too. That is to say, its advocates have to argue that reflection on scenarios is indeed an *a priori*, autonomous, and reliable way to acquire insight into metaphysical modality. Modal rationalism founders on this second, epistemic constraint. On the one hand, I show that basing modal rationalism on a supposed link between what is conceivable and what is metaphysically possible won't work. On the other hand, I deal with Williamson's ideas that our metaphysically modal knowledge rest on our ability to evaluate counterfactual conditionals, and that this ability allow us to reliably evaluate counterfactuals of all sorts from the armchair – including those relevant to the neo-rationalist. I reject both of Williamson's claims.

Chapter six introduces conceptual rationalism and defends a modest understanding of conceptual analysis. First of all, I explain *conceptual rationalists* to hold that the method of scenarios and intuitions is reliable *because* reflection on scenarios is a variety of conceptual analysis yielding conceptual knowledge. Secondly, I critically examine the classic account of concepts. This provides the helpful technical term of a *notion*: the notion a speaker associates with an expression consists of those conditions that she stably associates with the term in virtue of being a competent user, and that determine how she does and would reflectively apply it. It also makes me drop the theory-laden term 'concept'. Thirdly, I reject an ambitious or *Moorean* understanding of conceptual analysis and argue that we should adopt a modest or *Gricean* understanding instead. A Gricean conceptual analysis aims to recover knowledge of meanings from knowledge of notions. That is to say, it aspires to construe what our terms mean in our mouths from how we do and would apply them. Finally, I argue that a Gricean analysis need not be *Socratic*. There is no need to provide individually necessary and jointly sufficient non-disjunctive features that, taken together, yield a traditional synonym. A Gricean analysis can make do with describ-

ing the analysanda's meaning in technical terms. This makes it easy for advocates of Gricean analysis to defuse the *Paradox of Analysis* and to evade Ramsey's and Kornblith's *Argument from Prototype Theory*.

Chapter seven takes up serious objections to conceptual analysis rooted in Quine and Kripke. On the one hand, Gricean conceptual analysis relies on the idea that there are conceptual or analytic truths. I defend this claim against what are essentially Quinean objections. I reject Quine's arguments from *Two Dogmas*, I answer the popular claim, put forth by Quine and Cas-sam, that there cannot be analytic truths because no truth is purely conventional by pointing out that we are merely committed to epistemic analyticities in Boghossian's sense, and I rebut Williamson's argument designed to show that there are no analytic truths in this sense. I also reject the idea that analytic truths must be of the insignificant "Bachelors are unmarried"-variety. From Lewis and Jackson we learn that there are substantial specimens of conceptual truths. On the other hand, Gricean conceptual analysis relies on the idea that we can learn what a term means by making explicit its notion. This runs counter to the influential Kripkean contention that the meanings of proper names, natural kind terms, artefact expressions etc. are fixed independently of the notions we associate with them. In order to locate the precise point of disagreement, I point out that rigid designation is perfectly compatible with conceptual analysis. What goes against conceptual analysis is Kripke's other key semantic contention, *viz.* that semantic properties are often fixed by a causal-historical chain.

Chapter eight introduces and motivates a semantic theory I call *neo-descriptivism*. Having motivated simple truth-conditional semantics in the tradition of Lycan, Kripke, and Putnam, I argue, first, that we need to accept sophisticated truth-conditional semantics. This semantics invokes the distinction, rooted in Kaplan and widely accepted in recent semantic theory, between *counterfactual* worlds (circumstances, ways our world could have been, metaphysical possibilities) and *counteractual* worlds (contexts, ways our world might turn out to be, epistemic possibilities), and it assigns sentences counteractual truth-conditions (*representational contents*) as well as counterfactual truth-conditions (*semantic contents*). The formal model of sophisticated truth-conditional semantics thus comes out two-dimensional. Secondly, I introduce neo-descriptivism. This semantics shares the commitment to sophisticated truth-conditional semantics with its Kripkean rival. Both accounts also agree on rigid designation, *a posteriori* necessity, and the semantics of descriptive terms such as 'grandmother'. But Kripkeans

hold that causal-historical chains fix the representational contents of natural kind terms etc., whereas neo-descriptivism claims that they are fixed by the notions we associate with them. Thirdly, I point out that neo-descriptivism is an attractive stance since it accommodates externalist and internalist ideas, provides a straightforward explanation of Kripke's necessities *a posteriori* and contingencies *a priori*, and ties in nicely with a general picture of language as a representational system of communication.

Chapter nine makes a comprehensive case for neo-descriptivism. I present three arguments in favour of this semantics. The *Argument from Reference Fixers* maintains that a sensible account of natural kind terms inspired by Kripke is incompatible with a causal-historical semantics, the *Argument from Possible Cases* makes the claim that the methodology Kripke and Putnam employ can be successful only if neo-descriptivism is true, and the *Argument from Communication* asserts that we cannot account for the fact that natural kind terms, proper names etc. are used to convey information unless we accept neo-descriptivist ideas. I go on to deal with objections to the neo-descriptivist semantics. I explain why objections to traditional descriptivism do not work against neo-descriptivism, I analyse and rebut the argument from ignorance based on Gödel and Feynman cases, I deal with the argument from variability, and I discuss and reject Stalnaker's meta-semantic two-dimensionalism. I conclude that neo-descriptivism is the correct semantics. This independently motivated conclusion entails that conceptual analysis is feasible after all: in spite of Kripkean claims to the contrary, we can reliably ascertain what our terms mean by spelling out our notions. I conclude that conceptual rationalism does meet the accessibility constraint.

Chapter ten takes up the relevance condition and explores the background. In a first step, I argue that conceptual knowledge is philosophically significant even if it does not contribute to factual knowledge. Conceptual knowledge is of true philosophical importance because many philosophical questions raise conceptual issues and are answerable by conceptual knowledge. In a second step, I examine well-known ideas as to how conceptual knowledge might yield or contribute to factual knowledge. I discuss proposals to derive factual from conceptual knowledge in Lowe, Bealer, Hanfling, Davidson and Rudder-Baker. I argue that neither the idea of determinate concept-possession, nor the formal, transcendental and empirical principles proposed by these authors sustain such a derivation. I conclude that arguing the neo-rationalists' case is far harder than one would have thought.



In chapter eleven, I devise three arguments to show that conceptual knowledge we gain by conceptual analysis yields as well as contributes to factual knowledge, thus proving the conceptual rationalists to be right. The *Argument From Strong Possibilities* maintains that (non-indexical) conceptual necessities are *ipso facto* metaphysical necessities. Assuming otherwise leads to conceptual necessities that are metaphysically contingent but cannot be accounted for by Kripkean procedures. Such *strong possibilities* are arguably fatal to modal metaphysics, and we have no reason to think that there are any. So conceptual knowledge yields factual knowledge, given that we accept metaphysical necessities as factual. The *Modest Argument from Reductive Explanations* claims that conceptual knowledge allows us to devise, to use Jackson's influential term, reductive explanations that in turn solve location problems such as "How can it be that there is consciousness in our fundamentally physical world?". Since reductive explanations do provide factual knowledge by anyone's standards, conceptual knowledge contributes to factual knowledge. The *Bold Argument from Reductive Explanations* improves on the modest argument by maintaining that we as a rule cannot bring about reductive explanations *unless* we have suitable conceptual knowledge. Conceptual knowledge is as a rule required in order to provide reductive explanations, and in order to solve location problems.