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Is Philosophy an Armchair Discipline? Emma Swinn and Stephen Law in Conversation

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Abstract

What is philosophy? Some believe it is essentially an armchair discipline – something that we can do, roughly speaking, in our heads. It should to be distinguished from other, empirical disciplines such as physics, chemistry. However, others argue that there's much more to philosophy than just armchair reflection. This dialogue explores these issues.

Stephen Law (S.L.)

Like many philosophers, I consider philosophy an 'armchair activity', alongside other armchair activities such as, for example, doing maths, logic, sudoku and chess puzzles.

Of course, by calling these 'armchair' activities, I don't mean that they can only be done *literally* while sitting an armchair. 'Armchair', here, is shorthand for activities that can be, roughly speaking, *done in the head*. Clearly, solving a sudoku puzzle, or figuring out the answer to a maths puzzle, is something you can do in the head. We don't need to observe the world in order to figure out the answer. You can work out what 3 × 6 is even while blindfold and wearing earplugs.

There's an obvious contrast between these armchair activities and the empirical sciences – physics, chemistry, astronomy, biology, and so on. These disciplines are firmly rooted in observation of the world around us. We use telescopes and microscopes, and engage in laboratory experiments in order to figure out the answers to such scientific questions as: How old is the Earth? What explains the tides? and: What causes tooth decay? It's not possible to figure out the answers to these questions just by sitting in our favourite armchair, closing our eyes, putting in our earplugs, and having a good think.

This isn't to deny that those who engage in the empirical sciences also do some armchair work. Once a scientist has collected some observational data, they can then sit in their armchair and think about what might best explain it. Still, the questions they are trying to answer relate to how things stand in the world outside their own minds and their answers are based on *observational evidence.*

The view that we can only know about how things stand in the world outside our own minds by *observing* the world – by using our senses of sight, touch, hearing, and so on – is known as *empiricism*. Empiricism seems quite plausible to me. How else might we know about how things stand 'out there' other than by taking a look? Someone just sitting in an armchair and thinking isn't going to find out anything about how things actually stand in the external world.

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Contrast trying to answer a scientific question with solving a purely conceptual puzzle such as the following. Suppose you know that the following relations all hold between people present at a party: aunt, uncle, mother father, son, daughter, niece, nephew, cousin. The question is: given all those relationships hold between people attending the party, *could there be just four people present?* At first sight, the answer might seem obvious: no. That's far too many relationships to hold between just four people. However, a little armchair reflection can reveal that there *could* be just four people present. A brother and sister, the former with a daughter and the latter with a son, would do it. Notice that figuring this out is entirely an

armchair activity. It's done at the level of concepts: unpacking what's required in order for all those different relationships to hold.

'… philosophy today often relies on insights and data from the sciences – neuroscience, psychology, physics, biology and cognitive science, among others. Philosophers of mind engage with findings from neuroscience to refine theories of consciousness, intentionality and perception.'

Of course, this armchair activity merely reveals what is *possible*. At first, it seemed impossible that there need be only four people present. But then, after doing some conceptual work, we figured out that what initially *seemed* to be ruled conceptually was in fact possible after all.

However, if you want to know not just whether it's possible there were four people at the party, but how many people were *actually* present, you'll need to investigate empirically. That fact can't be established from the comfort of our armchairs. It seems that, when it comes to finding out how things actually stand in the world outside our own minds, we need to observe the world. For example, I could check the CCTV images of the party, or check the invite list, or ask someone who attended the party.

Philosophical puzzles often have a similar conceptual character to them. Take the mind–body problem. How is it possible for the subjective character of conscious experience to be enjoyed by a mere physical object, such as brain, or a human being? How could *this* – this subjective patch of red in my visual field, or the taste of a bitter lemon – be, say, just a brain state? Some philosophers suppose that they can know from the comfort of their armchairs, just by reflecting on the nature of subjective experience, that no material object could *possibly* possess consciousness. Descartes, for example, believed he could establish from the comfort of his armchair that the mind *cannot possibly* be physical – our conscious minds are something that exists in addition to our physical bodies, and are capable of existing quite independently. Other philosophers have argued that there is no such 'armchair obstacle' to minds being brains. Our conscious experiences might not seem to us, experienced from the inside, like brain states, but that's what they might yet turn out to be.

Whether or not there is such an armchair, conceptual obstacle to minds being brains remains a very contentious issue. But notice that the question will be answered, if at all, by doing armchair, conceptual work. Of course we can scientifically investigate brains and perhaps discover that what goes on in our minds and in our brains are correlated. Perhaps, whenever I think about cheese, a certain neurone fires in my brain. But establishing this correlation would not establish identity – it would not establish that my thinking about cheese just is that neurone firing, in the same way that water *just is* H_2O, or lightning *just is* an electrical discharge. Smoke and fire are correlated – whenever one occurs so does the other (for the most part) – but that doesn't show that smoke just is fire. In fact smoke clearly isn't fire. Showing that mind could be brain, or alternatively, couldn't be, is something we'll need to figure out from the comfort of our armchairs. It's a conceptual, philosophical puzzle requiring conceptual, armchair work to solve.

Other philosophical puzzles also seem to be armchair puzzles. Take the classic puzzle: How do I know I am not living in The Matrix? Perhaps all my experiences are being generated by a powerful super-computer designed to deceive me? I can't show that I am not living in The Matrix by appealing to observation, because my observations simply take for granted that I am not living in The Matrix. Everything would seem the same to me even if I were in The Matrix, and so how things appear, observationally, cannot settle whether or not I'm being deceived by such a super-computer.

A bit of clarification. By saying these are armchair puzzles requiring conceptual work to solve them (assuming they can be solved), I am not denying that *of course we first acquire concepts through experience.* You no doubt learned what a triangle is by interacting with other human beings. Perhaps they explained the meaning of 'triangle' to you like so: 'A triangle is a three straight-sided plane figure', and/or by pointing to various examples of triangles. However, *once you have* the concept of a triangle, you are then immediately in a position to know, from the comfort of your armchair, that there are no four-sided triangles. If someone claims to have discovered a four-sided triangle in the jungles of Peru, the Mathematical Institute is not going to fund an expedition to go and check whether that four-sided triangle is really there. The mathematicians can know, from the comfort of their armchairs, that it's not there. Such a triangle is *impossible*. It's ruled out *conceptually*.

So, yes, you acquired your concepts of mind and brain through experience. However, once you have these concepts, can you then figure out, from the comfort of your armchair, whether or not there is an armchair, conceptual obstacle to minds being brains? That's the distinctively *philosophical* puzzle about mind and brain. It's an *armchair* puzzle.

Emma Swinn (E.S.)

Grappling with complex concepts can certainly be done from the comfort of an armchair – just as it can be done while walking in the street, climbing a mountain, lying in bed, or gazing at the stars (or sitting at a computer typing). The issue is not *where* philosophy can take place, but *how* it is best practised. The idea of philosophy as an "armchair discipline" suggests a solitary thinker, detached from the world, relying purely on introspection and abstract reasoning. This, I suggest, is a limited and ultimately misleading conception of what philosophy is – or at least, what it ought to be.

The best form of philosophy is not a solitary pursuit. It is inherently dialogical. It thrives in the back-and-forth of ideas between different minds, cultures and eras. Philosophers engage not only with each other in the present, but also across centuries – arguing, refining, challenging and building on the work of those who came before. Philosophy is a conversation, not a monologue.

When philosophy is done 'in an armchair' – by someone thinking alone, unchallenged – it risks becoming narrow, detached, even wrong. A solitary perspective, no matter how intelligent, is limited. Philosophical insight depends on engaging with others, with different worldviews, and with the ever-changing world itself. Our concepts evolve. Just as the concepts of 'armchair' and 'philosophy' may evolve during this conversation! Our understanding deepens through confrontation with new experiences, evidence and perspectives.

Take the example of how our understanding of the cosmos has changed. The definition of 'planet' has shifted over time – Pluto, once counted as the ninth planet, has been reclassified as a dwarf planet. In the past, even the sun and moon were considered planets. These shifts remind us that concepts are not static – they reflect human understanding, which grows and changes through dialogue, discovery and debate.

We can construct theories about life, ethics, metaphysics, or consciousness entirely in our heads – but what is the point if those ideas never touch the world, or are never touched *by* it? Philosophy must apply to life. It must *matter*. And for it to matter, it must be tested, challenged and enriched through engagement with real people, situations and experiences.

Consider the philosophy of education. It cannot simply be the result of isolated theorizing. If we want to understand how to educate young people well, we need observation, experimentation, feedback and adaptation. We must see how theories play out in classrooms, how they affect children and teachers. We must be willing to revise them when they fail or cause harm.

'However, I don't think of questions such as "What system works best educationally or politically?" as philosophical questions. I consider them empirical questions.'

The same is true of political and moral philosophy. Ideas about justice, rights, governance and freedom must be tested against lived realities. Societies change, cultures evolve and philosophical theory must respond accordingly. Without empirical grounding, political and moral philosophy risks irrelevance – or worse, harm.

H. A. Prichard concludes in his 1912 paper 'Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake' that moral obligation is not something that can be proved or justified by general philosophical theories. Instead, it's something we immediately apprehend through intuition in specific situations.

> The only remedy lies in actual[ly] getting into a situation which occasions the obligation … and then letting our moral capacities of thinking do their work.

And what of aesthetics? The philosophy of art, music and drama cannot exist only in abstraction. These are embodied experiences. They must be seen, heard, felt – over and over again. Aesthetic theories develop as we engage with new works, forms and artistic practices. The philosopher of art must return to the gallery, the concert hall, the theatre, again and again.

I agree with Stephen that a certain part of philosophy can occasionally and partially take place in an armchair, office, tent, or wherever you have time for reflection and/or logical thought. But I contend that this is a narrow view of philosophy and only takes into account what could be considered 'the beginning stages' of philosophy, or a technique that underpins philosophy. In Stephen's armchair version philosophers analyse propositions and scientists verify them.

However, philosophy today often relies on insights and data from the sciences – neuroscience, psychology, physics, biology and cognitive science, among others. Philosophers of mind engage with findings from neuroscience to refine theories of consciousness, intentionality and perception. Similarly, ethicists may draw on psychological studies to understand moral behaviour. This empirical grounding contrasts sharply with the traditional 'armchair' method that relied solely on introspection or a priori reasoning. The debate on free will is no longer just metaphysical – it now includes experiments in neuroscience that examine whether brain activity precedes conscious decision-making.

Philosophy, at its core, is a *relational* activity. It asks us to consider our place in the world – not in isolation, in the mind (or brain?) of one person, but in relation to others. To practice philosophy well, we must be in the world, with others, thinking together, learning together. Philosophy must not only seek to change the world – it must be *changed* by it.

S.L.

I agree with you that philosophy need not be a solitary pursuit. Philosophical debate with others is obviously worthwhile – Socrates' discussions with others in the Agora were obviously not a solitary activity. By interacting

with others, we can be confronted with challenges to what we believe. Others may point out errors in our own thinking. By calling philosophy an armchair activity, I don't mean to suggest that it is necessarily a solitary activity. I said that it's an armchair activity that, roughly speaking, can be done in the head, but of course we can do stuff in our heads together. Mathematicians engaging with mathematical puzzles aren't doing empirical science – they have no need of telescopes, microscopes, laboratories, and so on. Mathematics is an armchair, 'in the head' activity. And yet it can be a shared activity. Mathematicians get together around blackboards and together figure out the solutions to puzzles. Philosophers, too, can work together on puzzles, and collectively figure out solutions. By calling maths and philosophy 'armchair activities' I don't mean to suggest that it must done in isolation. We can pull our armchairs together and work as a team.

I think you are right that insofar as we want to construct theories about what helps human beings flourish, or what works educationally, or what political systems work best, then we will need to draw heavily on psychology, sociology and other empirical disciplines. Empiricists insist that sitting in our armchairs and having a good think cannot reveal to us how the world actually is or how it works. That sort of knowledge requires that we observe the world. I agree with that. However, I don't think of questions such as 'What system works best educationally or politically?' as philosophical questions. I consider them empirical questions. True, armchair reflection can be helpful. For example, if you want to know whether democracy is better than some other political system, you'll need to know what democracy essentially is and figuring that out involves conceptual clarification – armchair work.

Is neuroscience relevant to philosophy of mind? The findings from neuroscience are obviously relevant insofar as we are trying to explain how creatures such as ourselves are able to keep track of objects in our vicinity, work out chess puzzles and do all sorts of other things that we conscious beings can do. Explaining all that is sometimes called the 'easy' problem of consciousness. On the other hand, there's the 'hard problem' of consciousness. That problem is generated by two opposing lines of argument. First, it seems consciousness has to be physical if it is to have physical effects. On the other hand it seems to many of us that we can know, from the comfort of our armchairs, that consciousness cannot possibly be physical. Indeed there appear to some to be watertight armchair arguments (e.g. Frank Jackson's argument about Mary, Descartes argument for dualism, etc.) for why consciousness cannot possibly be physical. So what the physicalist who believes consciousness is physical would need to do to solve this philosophical 'hard' problem is show that these conceptual, armchair obstacles to consciousness being physical are illusory. Showing that these impossibilities are merely apparent requires conceptual armchair work, not empirical investigation. Insofar as the 'hard problem' is the key problem philosophers of consciousness are grappling with, neuroscience is largely irrelevant.

Perhaps a trickier case for me is the question 'How ought we to live?', which is certainly a question philosophers have addressed and that is often considered a philosophical question. However I'd consider it a hybrid question – a question with philosophical and empirical components to it which can be teased apart. I'd prefer to keep the title "philosophy" for just the armchair component. Someone who is engaged in an empirical study into the effects of various teaching methods, or the extent to which competing political systems help people flourish, is not, it seems to me, doing philosophy. They're just doing science.

By the way, this isn't quite right: 'In Stephen's armchair version philosophers analyse propositions and scientists verify them.' I think you can establish the truth and falsehood of propositions from the comfort of your armchair, for example you can show it's true that there need be only four people at that party.

E.S.

Perhaps I got carried away with that false dichotomy …

In your first contribution, when talking about the empirical sciences, you said:

> It's not possible to figure out the answers to these questions just by sitting in our favourite armchair, closing our eyes, putting in our earplugs, and having a good think.

And when I suggested that philosophy of education and political philosophy had to go into the world and respond to it rather than just be an armchair discipline, you say, 'I'd prefer to keep the title "philosophy" for just the armchair component.' So perhaps we are not arguing over whether philosophy is an armchair discipline but rather what philosophy is?

How would you distinguish philosophy from other armchair disciplines you mentioned? And can you really carve up the philosophical component from the empirical component when dealing with what is an undeniable philosophical question: 'how ought we to live?'?

S.L.

Yes, I think we are arguing about what philosophy is, and/or about what should be classed as 'philosophy'.

Of course, there was a time when all forms of inquiry were classed as 'philosophy'. The empirical sciences were called 'natural philosophy', for example. However, the term 'philosophy' has evolved. Now, physics, chemistry, biology and the other empirically based disciplines are no longer classed as philosophy. The term 'philosophy' has come to be reserved for what are, or at least appear to be, essentially non-empirical questions – armchair questions. At least, that's how I use 'philosophy'. I do think it's a pretty standard way of using 'philosophy', and I don't think there's anything wrong with it.

However, not all armchair thinking is philosophical thinking. Solving sudoku puzzles or figuring out what 12 times 12 is, is not doing philosophy. You ask – and it's an interesting question – how I would then distinguish philosophy from other armchair activities, such as doing maths, solving sudoku puzzles, and so on.

My suggestion would be that philosophy deals with non-empirical, armchair questions or puzzles that have a certain character. Examples include:

1. What-is-x?' type questions that demand we drill down into what's *essential*, what *makes something* X, such as: 'What is justice', 'What is democracy?', 'What is a good life?', 'What is art?', 'What is maths?', 'What is knowledge?', 'What am I?', What is free will?', and 'What is consciousness?'
2. Questions that seem to reach beyond the ability of empirical science to answer them, and also beyond the ability of any other armchair discipline (such as maths or geometry), such as: 'Why is there anything at all?', 'Could I switch bodies with someone?', 'Given determinism, can I have free will?', and 'Why do mirrors reverse left-right, but not top-bottom?' These questions obviously relate directly to questions of the first sort. To answer 'Could I switch bodies with someone?' I first need to figure out what I am, essentially. To answer the question of whether I can be both physically determined and possess free will, I need to figure out what free will essentially is.
3. Questions about the ultimate nature of reality, such as 'What is reality?', 'What, ultimately, exists?' Again, these questions either are, or relate directly to, questions of the first sort. To answer 'What, ultimately, exists?' I need to answer 'What is existence?'
4. Ethical and meta-ethical questions: 'How ought I to live?', 'Is it morally acceptable to eat meat?'. 'Do we have moral obligations, and if so, why?' 'What does it mean to say that something is morally good/bad?' Again, these questions either are, or relate directly to, questions of the first sort. To answer 'Do we have moral obligations?' we need to answer 'What is a moral obligation?'

You ask about carving up the philosophical and empirical components of questions. Let me

illustrate with the question 'What is reality?' I think this question is ambiguous.

I think the question 'What is reality?', insofar as what's really being asked is 'What's ultimately "out there"?' or 'What's the world *made out of*, ultimately?', is not one that philosophy is well placed to answer. If you want to know what's 'out there', you'll need to take a look. It's an empirical question. Science will be indispensable. Science has shown that the ancient Greek philosopher Thales was wrong, everything is *not* made out of water. Science may answer by telling us about atoms and quarks and so on. Armchair reflection is pretty useless when it comes to answering *that* question.

On the other hand, if the question 'What is reality?' is intended as an inquiry into *essence*, then it's an armchair question – a question related to: 'What do we *mean by* 'reality'?' It's a question that can only be answered by engaging in a *conceptual* investigation. Science can't really help with this one.

In short, the question 'What is reality?' nicely illustrates how, actually, we can tease apart a philosophical question from an empirical/scientific question, both of which can be raised using the same form of words. Unless we do this teasing, we're likely to end up very confused – it's difficult to answer a question if you're not even clear what question it is you're trying to answer.

I think that 'How ought we to live?' and 'How do we lead good lives?' are, similarly, questions with both empirical and philosophical dimensions to them. They are questions that require we first be able to answer the question 'What is a good life?', intended as an inquiry into what's *essential. That* question is essentially a conceptual one – an inquiry into what we mean by a 'good life' or what it essentially is. Empirical investigation is largely irrelevant. However, if 'How do we lead good lives?' is intended as an inquiry into the *recipe* for achieving what we have now identified as being a good life, then empirical inquiry becomes very relevant. For example, if we have figured out (from the comfort of our armchairs) that a good life is, in essence, one in which people feel happy and content, then scientific investigation into what makes people feel happy and content is obviously relevant. Teasing out the armchair and empirical components to these issues is not terribly difficult. Calling the empirical components 'philosophy' seems to me misguided. A scientific researcher into whether Prozac leads people to feel happier and more content is not, it seems to me, 'doing philosophy'.

I think it's correct to call questions that have philosophical dimensions to them 'philosophical questions', but that doesn't mean that every activity we might engage in in trying to answer them – including sitting in a science lab and doing an experiment – is then an example of 'doing philosophy'.

E.S.

In short, the question 'What is reality?' nicely illustrates how, actually, we can tease apart a philosophical question from an empirical/scientific question, both of which can be raised using the same form of words. Unless we do this teasing, we're likely to end up very confused – it's difficult to answer a question if you're not even clear what question it is you're trying to answer.

I really like this example – it is something that happens in the classroom (mini-armchairs?), we need to distinguish between what sort of questions we are answering, and indeed some 'philosophical' questions could be read as 'empirical' ones. I have seen some classroom discussions move back and forth between these two realms.

However, I think this is oversimplifying philosophy – many philosophical questions are hybrid and resist a simple division into empirical or conceptual. Philosophical enquiry can move between the two; in fact in many cases, as I stated earlier, they absolutely need to move between perceived reality, conceptual thinking and testing in the world.

Taking your refutation of my inclusion of neuroscience in philosophy of mind – neuroscience can challenge and reshape our intuitions about consciousness. Empirical data may

force revisions on our conceptual framework or expose assumptions we may have missed in our armchair wonderings (or wanderings …).

I would therefore argue that philosophy is not purely conceptual, in many cases, such as the ones I have already mentioned; it is interdisciplinary, and in fact needs to be to develop. Political philosophy needs real-world data; ethical philosophy has to be informed by case studies that will combine with arguments and conceptual frameworks to come to new conclusions or theories.

Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham's work on moral foundations suggested that moral disagreements are not just conceptual but cultural and psychological. This impacts directly on meta- and normative ethics: are our moral beliefs cognitively reliable, and how do we design ethical systems and policies based on actual behaviour?

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach took the armchair philosophy of John Rawls and hit it with a data stick when considering evaluating well-being or how to lead a good life. The capability approach stands alongside virtue ethics, deontology and consequentialism as a major ethical theory, but one that is uniquely informed by real-world data. Martha Nussbaum develops this approach in *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* where she develops her list of ten capabilities that are needed for a flourishing human life. Although some argue that this list is static (even Nussbaum originally), Sen argued that no list can be complete because it needs to be open to revision. Nussbaum has since become more flexible in her thinking and suggests that the list could be altered in light of new data.

This shows a perfect example of the symbiotic relationship between the empirical and conceptual: the boundaries between them are porous. By dismissing philosophy in practice (and the interdisciplinary element of this practice) one marginalizes both philosophy as an applied socially engaged activity, and key figures such as Nussbaum and Sen above – but also the likes of John Dewey in the philosophy of education.

Your claim of philosophy being largely answering 'What is X' questions suggests you are leaning towards philosophy being a semantic operation. This again leaves out many vital elements of the philosophical canon which are based on experience (phenomenology), on narrative, cultural and social experience as philosophical tools (critical theory), and existentialism which is rooted in human existence.

As you are giving me the final say here, I will acknowledge that you would probably argue this is a straw man: you would not dismiss these parts of philosophy (although you might argue that some of the parts within them are not 'philosophy'?), and might even press that the philosophical element itself is one of conceptual language and logic, i.e. that it can be done just in the head; whether that is an armchair or a blackboard remains open.

My point is that ignoring the social nature of philosophy and the impact of communities on philosophical ideas vastly limits the philosophical act itself. Philosophy requires engagement with the world and, more importantly, with others to check bias, broaden views and ground ideas in lived reality. Philosophy evolves through critique, debate, cultural context and historical change; it is not only conceptual analysis. The risk of intellectual insularity and cognitive bias is higher when we are detached from lived experience, empirical data and broader dialogues. Philosophy is critical and constructive, but in order for it to progress it needs input from the world.

As you stated, all disciplines came from philosophy, but by distinguishing them now entirely from philosophy you remove the heart from this practice, which is essentially human-centred. The philosophical questions you list are important human questions.

So, I come back to my first argument: yes, these important questions can be done alone in an armchair, but without other perspectives, without empirical data and observations, without applying it to the world, the answers are poorer and can easily become irrelevant. For philosophy to work – and it is a very important aspect of every subject and life – it should not

be done in isolation, nor distinguished so clearly from 'empirical sciences'. By taking it into the conceptual domain and leaving the real world for the sciences, philosophy risks becoming a game of solitaire, an exercise in semantic problem-solving, detached from lived experience. Surely this was never the point of philosophy? It should be used to understand the world, to develop your thinking in light of new ideas, and to use what is given to it to progress. Your claim that philosophy is an armchair discipline misses the point that that is not *all* it is or should be. By sitting it down (!) and stating it is a conceptual game you can play in your head (or in a group) makes the discipline itself poorer, and the world a poorer place without philosophy being used to help us shift policy, theory and practice.

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