

# ARMCHAIR SCIENCE AND ARMCHAIR PHILOSOPHY

**Anton V. Kuznetsov** – PhD in Philosophy, junior research associate.  
Lomonosov Moscow State University.  
1 Leninskie Gory, Moscow,  
119991, Russian Federation.  
e-mail: anton.smith@philos.msu.ru

Williamson defends armchair philosophy by likening it to armchair science – they have the same echelon of results and use such a priori methods as model building and conditional analyses. More, if a priori methods are accepted within science, then they acceptable in philosophy – thus, armchair philosophy is justified. However, I am not swayed by this reasoning: there could be non-armchair philosophers who use these a priori methods. So, there are two options – revise the notion of armchair philosophy or add more details to the aforementioned reasoning.

**Keywords:** armchair philosophy, armchair science, a priori methods

# КАБИНЕТНАЯ НАУКА И КАБИНЕТНАЯ ФИЛОСОФИЯ

Кузнецов Антон Викторович – кандидат философских наук, младший научный сотрудник.  
Московский государственный университет имени М.В. Ломоносова.  
Российская Федерация, 119991, г. Москва, Ленинские горы, д. 1.  
e-mail: anton.smith@philos.msu.ru

Уильямсон защищает кабинетную философию, связывая ее с понятием кабинетной науки, в которых мы видим схожие результаты и в которых существенную роль играют априорные методы, такие как кондициональный анализ и построение моделей. Применимость априорных методов в науке влечет их применимость и в философии. Таким образом, кабинетная философия получает обоснование. Однако я не убежден этим рассуждением, так как могут быть не-кабинетные философы, пользующиеся априорными методами. В таком случае есть две опции: пересмотреть понятие кабинетной философии или дополнить данное рассуждение новыми деталями.

**Ключевые слова:** кабинетная философия, кабинетная наука, априорные методы

Throughout the target article, Williamson defends armchair philosophy by likening it to armchair science, in which a priori methods play a substantive role. This enables the reader to consider scientific inquiry and results from an unusual viewpoint. From this panorama, scientific inquiry does not only generate laws, but also new models. Moreover, using mathematics as an exemplar of armchair science, one can see that a priori methods are not exclusively deductive: instead, they are largely inductive. This kind of “armchair induction” pervades both philosophy and science, and both boast model building and conditional analysis as their key forms of armchair practice. Thus, we can achieve scientific results via a priori methods. Additionally, if we understand that the primary results of the philosophical inquiry are not laws, but, instead, models that are obtained by a priori methods, then we get the rationale of armchair philosophy. Here, armchair philosophy is a part of armchair science.



However, the significant role that armchair methods play in science does not give establish armchair philosophy, otherwise it significantly weakens its notion.

I can find criticism via two objections:

1. Mathematics and philosophy are significantly different – the ontology of formal systems is known without a trace: we know all the basic laws of these systems. There is no such thing either in philosophy (except logic) or science.
2. Model building in science relies on empirical results and is mediated by them, while the pathos of the armchair philosophy is that its results do not need to be justified by empirical data.

Thus, the justification of the armchair methods by pointing to the model building does not answer the question of why we should trust the models of armchair philosophy itself (again, let's spare logic). The armchair methods of obtaining such models are not in doubt: but why do these models have explanatory potential, even though they are not connected with empirical research? This is the main question for the armchair philosophy. If this question is not asked, then there is a significant change in the notion of armchair philosophy, which is understood as the study of philosophical theories, concepts and intuitions through a priori methods. Here, we are interested in the justification of a priori methods, not in the status of their results in relation to empirical data.

Based on the above, there can be formulated strong and weak notions of armchair philosophy:

*Weak notion:* Armchair philosophy is the study of philosophical problems via a priori methods.

*Strong notion:* Armchair philosophy is the study of philosophical problems via a priori methods, where the philosophical problems are *independent* of empirical ones and, therefore, the resulting philosophical theories are *independent* of empirical ones.

None of these notions appears to be correct. According to the former, the problem of armchair philosophy is justifying a priori methods. However, most likely, this is only part of the problem since the mere fact of using a priori methods doesn't specifically refer to armchair philosophy. This continues from the fact that so-called armchair science and non-armchair philosophy exist. The latter could use armchair methods but oppose itself to armchair philosophy. One of the most striking examples is the philosophy of Daniel Dennett, who uses the methods of armchair philosophy, but whom is its active critic [Dennett, 2010: 81–84]. Hence, the notion of armchair philosophy is not only in the use of armchair methods. So, the concern is also about a special kind of *independence* that armchair philosophy has from empirical science, which does not just concern itself with the method.

I agree with Williamson that a “pure” armchair philosophy, as a philosophy completely divorced from everything empirical, is impossible.



However, my point is more general – there is no cognitive practice completely divorced from any experience. Thus, if we take the strong notion of armchair philosophy as “pure”, then it is not viable. However, as I’m trying to show, some independence of philosophical theories and problems from empirical science is necessary for armchair philosophy. Otherwise, the notion of armchair philosophy would disappear.

One of the ways to answer the question may be that there are special philosophical intuitions that support philosophical inquiry. These intuitions are, to some extent, universal and need special philosophical training. Roughly speaking, this view is taken by Williamson in a dispute with early experimental philosophers [Williamson, 2007] [Weinberg, Nichols, Stich, 2001: 429–460]. If such defense is successful, then it is possible to postulate some independence of philosophical intuitions from empirical data. However, this still cannot serve as a defense of armchair philosophy. Rather, it can be considered as a defense of philosophy and the philosophical profession, but not armchair philosophy itself, since non-armchair philosophers also possess these intuitions and philosophical skills.

If this is correct, then we should recognize that Williamson’s reasoning did not reach its goal. Otherwise the very idea of armchair philosophy should be substantially revised and talking about separating armchair philosophy from non-armchair philosophy makes sense only when we want to defend philosophy from the attack of experimental philosophers and some scientists and laypeople. Here, all philosophers are one way or another armchair philosophers, even though some would never recognize themselves that way.

### **Список литературы / References**

- Dennett, 2010 – Dennett, D. “Two Black Boxes: a Fable”, *Activitas Nervosa Superior*, 2010, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 81–84.  
Weinberg, Nichols, Stich, 2001 – Weinberg, J. M., Nichols, S., Stich, S. “Normativity And Epistemic Intuitions”, *Philosophical Topics*, 2001, vol. 29, no. 1–2, pp. 429–460.  
Williamson, 2007 – Williamson, T. *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007, 346 pp.