

no physical object
has a colour
no one has ever
believed anything

AN INTRODUCTION TO

PHILOSOPHICAL METHODS

the world consists
of an infinity of
mental substances
time does not exist
no one knows anything
the world consists of
only atoms and the void
a single cent makes the
difference between being
rich and not
being rich

CHRIS DALY

An Introduction to Philosophical Methods

AN INTRODUCTION TO
PHILOSOPHICAL METHODS

CHRIS DALY



BROADVIEW GUIDES TO PHILOSOPHY

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LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Daly, Chris

An introduction to philosophical methods / Chris Daly.

(Broadview guides to philosophy)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-55111-934-2

1. Methodology. I. Title. II. Series: Broadview guides to philosophy

B53.D34 2010

101

C2010-903106-7

BROADVIEW PRESS is an independent, international publishing house, incorporated in 1985.

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c/o TL Distribution, 15-23 Helles Ave., Moorebank, NSW, Australia 2170

TEL: (02) 8778 9999 FAX: (02) 8778 9944

orders@tldistribution.com.au

www.broadviewpress.com

Edited by Robert Martin

Cover design and interior by Em Dash Design

This book is printed on paper
containing 100% post-consumer fibre.



Printed in Canada

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Preface

I am very grateful to Ryan Chynces at Broadview Press for his enthusiasm and encouragement in commissioning this book. Five anonymous referees for Broadview Press gave invaluable advice on an initial plan for the book. I have tried to implement all of their many suggestions on content and structure. Thanks also to Greg Janzen, Ryan's successor at Broadview, for seeing the book through to its printing. Tara Lowes and her production team did wonderful work in preparing the book.

Eve Garrard, David Liggins and Eric Steinhart generously read a draft of the entire manuscript. Their suggestions made tremendous improvements in the material. Rina Arya, Harry Lesser, Carrie Jenkins and Daniel Nolan gave invaluable feedback on several chapters.

Thanks also to Tony Anderson, Eric Barnes, James Robert Brown, Earl Conee, Tim Maudlin, John Norton and Jonathan Vogel for correspondence.

Bob Martin did a wonderful job in copy-editing the manuscript. He also provided a wealth of very helpful philosophical comments.

I have older debts to my former supervisors: Jeremy Butterfield, Peter Lipton, and Hugh Mellor. They have been very influential in many ways. Peter's sudden death in November 2007 remains crushing. He was a wonderful person and his book *Inference to the Best Explanation* has become a classic in its field.

This book is dedicated to Bump and Moula.

Introduction

Philosophers, like scientists, make various claims. But, unlike many scientists, philosophers do not use test tubes, telescopes, cloud chambers, or similar equipment in their work. This raises the question: what kinds of evidence are there for philosophical claims? Philosophical claims are characteristically speculative. Yet, if this means that such claims are unsupported, we might reasonably wonder why anyone should make such claims and why anyone should give them the slightest degree of belief.

Citing the published work of others will not tell us what kinds of support philosophical claims have because it only defers the question. We now need to know what kinds of support there are for those written claims. What reasons did the authors of the claims have for making them? There is a general point about the evidential value of testimony here. Even if testimony can provide us with reason to believe that some **proposition *P*** is true, the ultimate sources of the testimony — namely, the philosophers who made those claims in the first place — will have to had some other kinds of reason for believing that *P*. We need to know what those kinds of reason are.

Again, it may be an important general lesson in epistemology that it can be reasonable for someone to make certain claims even if that person does not have evidence to support those claims.¹ But presumably not all claims (not even all philosophical claims) have that status. Furthermore, even if it is reasonable for various philosophers to make certain claims without providing supporting evidence, if some of their claims are mutually incompatible we then face the challenge of selecting between those claims. It seems that meeting that challenge will require having reasons for the claims we select.

¹ For a defence of this view, see van Inwagen (1996).

Suppose we can identify at least some of the kinds of evidence that support philosophical claims. Matters do not end there because we would still need to evaluate the kinds of evidence. We would need to know just how good those kinds of evidence are. At one time people thought that the state of chicken entrails provided evidence about what lay ahead. That was clearly not the best method of predicting the future. But is there any reason why we should suppose that today's philosophers are any less in error? This is not an idle concern. Some philosophers have thought that philosophy's track record of discovering truths, as opposed to promulgating falsehoods, is no better than the track record of examining chicken entrails as a guide to the future.² So if one key issue concerns what kinds of evidence support philosophical claims, a second key issue concerns how reliable those claims are — how likely are they to lead to true claims as opposed to false ones.

The fact that philosophers do not have laboratories packed with testing and measuring equipment has perhaps encouraged the belief that they do not need them, and, more generally, that philosophers do not need *any* kind of empirical information in developing and defending their views. The idea is that if philosophers do not rely on empirical data, they must rely on non-empirical data. These data would have to be data of a special kind accessible by intellectual reflection in an armchair. And if philosophers' hypotheses are tested by non-empirical data, then these hypotheses themselves will not be empirical hypotheses. They will not be hypotheses about the empirical world, but hypotheses about how we think about the empirical world. They are hypotheses about our representations of things. Philosophy then becomes an enquiry into the nature of our representations or **concepts** of things. This encapsulates the idea of philosophy as **conceptual analysis**, of philosophical hypotheses as claims about what are concepts are like and how they are necessarily related to one another. This conception of philosophy continues to be influential.

The line of argument in the preceding paragraph, however, can be resisted. Even if philosophers do not have laboratories, and do not run empirical experiments, it does not follow that empirical data are irrelevant to philosophical theories. Such data might even be required by those theories. After all, many theoretical physicists themselves do not have laboratories and do not run empirical experiments. Nevertheless they depend upon the laboratory and field results of experimental physicists to get evidence for their theories.

According to one conception of philosophy — **naturalism** — philosophical hypotheses can receive empirical support (or empirical

² See, for example, Lewis (1991, 58–60) and Taylor (1968, 618–19).

disconfirmation). The support may often be indirect. The support may perhaps be even more indirect than the support that high-level physical theories receive from empirical observations. But the support is there nonetheless. This conception of philosophy may go on to make further claims about this support. In order of increasing strength, it may claim that empirical evidence supplements narrowly philosophical forms of evidence for philosophical claims; that it is the best kind of evidential support that philosophical claims can have; or that it is the only kind of evidential support that philosophical claims can have. We will consider naturalism and its methods particularly in chapter 6.

Something we learn from the discussion so far is that, unlike many other disciplines, not only do philosophers disagree about what claims are warranted, they also disagree about what methods to use and what types of data can support their claims. What methods and data should be used by philosophy is as controversial an issue as any other issue is in philosophy. This book takes a “twin track” approach. It addresses the descriptive issue of identifying some of the methods and types of data that philosophers have used. It also addresses the normative issue of how those methods should be evaluated, and how much support those types of data provide for philosophical claims. To pursue this normative issue, each chapter will contain case studies: actual examples of how certain methods or types of data have been used to support, or undermine, philosophical claims. This brings the descriptive and the normative issues together, as we need to be clear both about what evidence a particular philosopher offered for a certain claim, and also about how reliable that support was. There also seems to be no better way of testing a proposed method or the value of certain data than by examining how well they do in solving a knotty philosophical problem. As Bertrand Russell warned us, “nothing of any value can be said on method except through examples” (Russell 1914, 240). So the use of case studies is itself an indispensable methodological device in philosophy.

This book will be concerned with three broad questions about philosophical methodology:

- (Q1) What kinds of data support philosophical hypotheses, and how much support can they provide?
- (Q2) Which principles govern the selection of philosophical hypotheses?
- (Q3) What kinds of hypotheses are philosophical hypotheses supposed to be?

The data for philosophical hypotheses discussed in the book include the data supplied by **common sense** (chapter 1), **thought experiments** (chapter 3), and science (chapter 6). The principles of selection between philosophical hypotheses to be discussed include principles of **analysis** (chapter 2), simplicity (chapter 4), and explanation (chapter 5).

Issues about the methods and types of data that philosophers should use are entangled with views about the nature of philosophy. Such views belong to what is called “metaphilosophy”: the philosophical study of philosophy itself. Conceptual analysis and naturalism are examples of different metaphilosophies. (In fact, “conceptual analysis” and “naturalism” are each umbrella terms that cover a number of metaphilosophical views). Metaphilosophical views are especially hard to argue for. Moreover, many philosophers do not argue for, or even make explicit, whatever metaphilosophical views they hold. Very often whatever metaphilosophical views they may have are background assumptions that are only implicit in their work. This practice is understandable: these philosophers want to get on and tackle “first-order” philosophical problems about the nature of mind, or truth, or the physical world, and so on, not the “second-order” problem of the nature of philosophy. Still, the nature of philosophy is a legitimate area of philosophical inquiry. And since our views about this area, and about the nature of philosophical problems, will bear on how we tackle first-order philosophical problems, it deserves to be investigated as well.

Although philosophical methodology has connections with grand metaphilosophical issues, this should not mislead us. Much philosophical methodology consists in making or evaluating arguments, distinctions and qualifications. These practices are mostly not the special preserve of some particular metaphilosophical faction. For the most part, they form a common venture.

This book’s concern with philosophical problems, the principles used to try to resolve them, and the metaphilosophies underlying them reflects a more general concern with disciplined theoretical work in philosophy. Some may worry about how far this neglects the history of philosophy.³ The issue of the relation of philosophy to the history of philosophy is a controversial one. Although in this book I do not draw upon the history of philosophy, that is not because the book is committed to claiming that the history of philosophy has no important bearing on how philosophy should be studied.⁴ The book’s scope is intentionally limited in scope in several ways. If the history of philosophy has an important bearing on

³ Moore (2009, 116–17) raises just this worry about Williamson (2007).

⁴ For this issue, see Melnyck (2008b).

how philosophy should be studied, it seems that the relevant historical lessons can complement the non-historical philosophical claims made in this book.

The book's scope is restricted in two further respects. First, it will not explore every potential source of evidence for philosophical theories. For example, the epistemic status of testimony in philosophy will not be explored. Nor will any of the various formal methods that are used in philosophy. These methods have drawn on developments in logic and mathematics to bring increased rigour and precision to philosophy (Anderson 1998, §1). Some of these methods are, however, discussed in (Steinhart 2009), a related text to this book.

The second respect in which the book is deliberately restricted is that, even regarding the topics that it does discuss, not every aspect of those topics will be discussed. But while this book does not aim to be comprehensive, hopefully it provides a useful resource.

ONE Common Sense

1. Introduction

Philosophers have often put forward striking claims. Examples include the claims that time does not exist, that the world consists of only atoms and the void, that the world consists of an infinity of mental substances, that a single cent makes the difference between being rich and not being rich, that no physical object has a colour, that no one knows anything, and that no one has ever believed anything. For each of these claims, one issue is to understand exactly what the claim means. Another issue is to evaluate the claim. What reasons are there for accepting it? What reasons are there for doubting it? Which reasons are the stronger?

G.E. Moore was struck by what seemed to him to be the bizarre consequences of some of the claims that philosophers have made. For example, some idealists denied that time exists. But if their denial were correct, Moore argues, it would not be true that he had breakfast before he had lunch today, or that he put his socks on before he put his shoes on. Yet this conflicts with common sense. Again, some idealists denied that space exists. But their denial entails that nothing is in a spatial relation to anything else. It follows that it is false that Moore's clock is on the mantelpiece, even though common sense says that it is true. In these conflicts between common sense and highfaluting philosophy, Moore wholeheartedly backs common sense. In general, according to Moore, "[the] Common Sense view of the world is, in certain fundamental features, wholly true" (Moore 1925, 44), and any philosophical claim incompatible with common sense claims is false.

Moore's approach draws upon Aristotle's championing of common opinion in *Metaphysics* book B and the common sense philosophy advocated by Thomas Reid in the eighteenth century (Reid 1764). The approach taken by these philosophers raises three questions:

- (Q1) What is a common sense claim?
 (Q2) What justifies common sense claims?
 (Q3) What role (if any) should common sense claims have in philosophy?

Some of our claims belong to common sense, others do not. (Q1) asks on what basis this classification is made. It asks: what does it take for a given claim to be a common sense claim? Having made such a classification, (Q2) asks what significance the classification has. Perhaps a given claim is more credible than some other claim because only the first is a common sense claim. Or perhaps a claim's being a common sense claim does not confer any credibility on it. Given an answer to (Q2), we can address (Q3). (Q3) concerns what the proper role of common sense is in philosophical inquiry.

2. Moore's Defence of Common Sense

Moore begins his paper "A Defence of Common Sense" with a list of claims about his body and its relation to various other physical objects. For example, he claims that he has a body, that this body has existed for some time, that it has grown over that time, that it has not been far from the surface of the Earth during all that time, and that it has been at various distances from various other objects. Moore then makes a list of claims about his mind. He claims, for example, that he is now conscious and that he is now seeing something. Moore also claims to "*know, with certainty*" all of the claims in his lists (Moore 1959, 32). He further claims that he knows both that there are many other people and that they know similar lists of truisms about their own bodies and minds.

Moore follows a three-part strategy when a philosopher's argument conflicts with common sense. The first part of Moore's strategy amounts to standing the philosopher's argument on its head. Let's represent the proposition that time does not exist by p . Next, let's represent the proposition that I did not put my shoes on before I put my socks on by q . The idealist offers an argument of the following form:

p ,
 if p then q ,
 so q .

Moore offers a counter-argument of the form:

not- q ,
 if p then q ,
 so not- p .

Moore argues that because the idealist's conclusion, q , is false, so too is the idealist's premise, p . This leaves open, however, which of these rival arguments — the idealist's or Moore's — we should accept. The second part of Moore's strategy explains why we should accept his argument:

The only way ... of deciding between my opponent's argument and mine, as to which is the better, is by deciding which premise is known to be true.... And moreover the degree of certainty of the conclusion, in either case, supposing neither is quite certain, will be in proportion to the degree of certainty of the premises. (Moore 1953, 121–22)

Moore further claims that he is more certain of his claim to know than his opponent is of his own premise. When faced with a philosophical challenge to his claim to know a given common sense statement, Moore responds by saying

And I think we may safely challenge any philosopher to bring forward any argument in favour of either of the proposition that we do not know [the common sense statement to be true], or of the proposition that it is not true, which does not rest upon some premise which is, beyond comparison, less certain than is the proposition which it is designed to attack. (Moore 1959, 227–28)

Moore's response here appeals to what we might call *differential certainty*. He is more certain that at least one premise of his opponent's argument is false than he is that the common sense statement is false.¹

The third and final part of Moore's argumentative strategy is that Moore thinks that he can refute his opponent's argument without showing how he knows common sense statements to be true. Again he appeals to considerations of certainty: he is more certain that we know common sense statements than he is of any philosophical theory that would explain how we have that knowledge. Whether or not such an explanation is forthcoming, and whatever form it takes, such an explanation is inessential to our knowing common sense statements to be true.

To sum up, where a philosopher makes a claim that seems bizarre, Moore's strategy is to draw a consequence from that claim that is incompatible with common sense. Doing so shows why the claim is bizarre — it

1 Moore's response is endorsed by, amongst others, Chisholm (1982, 68–69), Pryor (2000, 518), Hirsch (2002, 68), Soames (2003, 22–23, 69–70, and 345), Lemos (2004, 11), Armstrong (2006, 160), Lycan (2007, 93–95), and Schaffer (2009, 357).

conflicts with common sense — and it also shows that the claim is false and that any argument in support of the claim is unsound. Any such argument either contains a false premise or a bad inferential step. It remains a further philosophical task to locate this flaw. Moore's strategy is supposed to establish that there is such a flaw, and so that we are reasonable in rejecting the philosopher's claim and any argument that he may have for it.

3. Defining Common Sense

Keith Campbell points out that Moore did not take common sense claims to serve as a foundation for a correct system of philosophy:

Rather they served as touchstones for propositions arrived at by other routes. Since all propositions must be compatible with them, common-sense beliefs, together with what they entail, serve as a *decisive, negative* yardstick for propositions of all kinds. (Campbell 1988, 163)

Although Moore gives an extensive list of examples of common sense claims, he does not say what makes a claim one of common sense. But unless the argument from differential certainty is to protect *all* popular beliefs from criticism and revision, and not just common sense beliefs, criteria for distinguishing common sense beliefs from merely popular beliefs need to be given (Coady 2007, 101). William Lycan offers a number of ways of characterizing common sense claims. Lycan's characterizations are deliberately conservative. Although all the claims that they count as belonging to common sense are also claims that Moore counts as belonging to common sense, they exclude some of the claims that Moore counts as belonging to common sense. In outline, Lycan's characterization says that a claim belongs to common sense if and only if:

- (1) it is "about something noted by someone at a particular time and place,"
- (2) that the claim is an instance of a more general claim that most people would accept if it were put to them,
- (3) that neither the claim nor the generalization use any specialized or technical terms,
- (4) that it is difficult to give up accepting the generalization,
- (5) that it would sound strange to assert the generalization because it is so obvious, and

- (6) that it would be peculiar to deny the generalization.
(Lycan 2001, 49–50)

Take, for example, Moore’s claim that the Earth existed many years before his body was born. That is a claim that a particular person made at a particular place and time. It is an instance of a generalization (namely, that the Earth existed for many years before many people’s bodies were born) that most people would agree to if it were put to them. Both the claim and its generalization are relatively easy to understand: neither of them involves specialized terms or some non-literal form of meaning. It is psychologically difficult for anyone to abandon belief in the generalization. Since the generalization is too obvious to mention, it would be odd to drop it into conversation unless suitable stage-setting had been made. And it would also be peculiar to deny the generalization in the course of a conversation unless, again, suitable stage-setting had been made.

The word “accept” is often used in a quasi-technical manner in philosophy. Presumably Lycan is taking “to accept” to mean *to believe*. But a weaker reading takes it to mean *to behave as if you believe*. When playing chess against a computer you may behave as if you believe that you are playing against an ambitious and imaginative player without your believing that the computer has any mental states. Perhaps our acceptance of the claims of common sense requires that we behave as if we believe them, but does not require that we believe them:

A common-sense view is a conception on which most of those who belong to that culture at that time habitually rely in their everyday thinking. It is not required that they should actually hold it to be correct — they, or some of them, may know, or think, otherwise: what matters is that their ordinary thinking proceeds *as if* it were correct. (Dummett 1979, 18)

At least for the sake of argument, however, let’s grant Lycan’s intended characterization of what counts as a common sense claim. We might wonder, though, whether a claim’s meeting the conditions set out in his characterization has epistemic significance (Conee 2001, 58). The conditions specify, broadly speaking, various psychological and sociological features: some claims are relatively easy to master and hard to abandon, others are not. But why should a claim’s having those features make it more plausible than one that lacks them? A claim’s plausibility is either (a) its reasonableness given initial evidence, or (b) its likelihood on all evidence. If (a), then a claim *C* may be more plausible than another claim *C**, but less justified than *C**, since the degree of justification of a claim

depends on more than its reasonableness on initial evidence (Conee 2001, 57). If (b), then the above question becomes pressing: what, if anything, is the connection between being a common sense claim and being a plausible claim?

4. Common Sense and Conservatism

It might be thought that the connection is provided by considerations of theoretical conservatism (hereafter “conservatism” for short). David Lewis writes that:

It's just that theoretical conservatism is the only sensible policy for theorists of limited powers, who are duly modest about what they could accomplish after a fresh start. Part of this conservatism is reluctance to accept theories that fly in the face of common sense. (Lewis 1986, 134)

According to the principle of conservatism, a person is to some degree justified in retaining a given belief just because that person has that belief. People then have some reason for continuing to believe that p if they already believe that p . We come to philosophy with various prior beliefs, including our common sense beliefs. Given a conflict between a common sense belief and a newly encountered philosophical claim, conservatism says that we are to some degree justified in maintaining the common sense claim just because we already maintain that claim. Conservatism will provide no such support to the newly made philosophical claim.

Two contrasting responses can be made to this appeal to conservatism. One response is concessive because it accepts conservatism; the other response is hard-line because it rejects conservatism. Although the concessive response accepts conservatism, it takes the principle to be *defeasible*. That is, the response allows that the evidence the principle provides can be defeated by counter-evidence. (Lewis [1986, 134–35] agrees.) Conservatism may provide evidence that p , but other factors might together form stronger evidence against p . This view is independently plausible. For example, Copernican theory and observation together provided sufficient reason to revise the long-held belief that the Sun orbits the Earth. Moreover, taking conservatism to be defeasible is not to take it to be peculiar. Many kinds of evidence (including perception, memory, and testimony) are also defeasible. So conservatism is in good company. The concessive response can then assess, in a case-by-case fashion, whether the conservative case for various common sense claims is stronger than any philosophical argument against them.

The hard line response rejects conservatism. This response has two elements. First, it claims that conservatism itself lacks epistemic justification, even defeasible epistemic justification (Christensen 1994, and Vahid 2004). Second, there is reason to reject conservatism. Consider the following example of the opinionated coin flipper (Christensen 1994, 74). This individual flips what he knows to be a fair coin and, without looking, forms the belief that it has landed tails. The fact that he has formed this belief provides no reason for him to maintain his belief that the coin landed tails. The believer is merely dogmatic. Yet conservatism says that the coin flipper is justified in maintaining his belief. The hard-line view concludes that conservatism is false and that it provides no connection between a claim's being common sense and its being justified.

5. Common Sense and Theory

Lycan himself comments that “Moore makes no argument from any proposition's *being common sensical* to that proposition's having any positive epistemic status” (Lycan 2001, 47–48). On the vexed issue of the nature of plausibility, Lycan writes that:

I maintain that although the psychological basis and normative authority of “plausibility” judgments are thorny and important philosophical issues, they are just that — philosophical issues. (Lycan 2001, 51, endnote 9)

By saying that a plausibility judgement has “normative authority,” Lycan means that such a judgment is entitled to tell us what we should believe. The authority of a plausibility judgment partly depends, however, on what it is a judgment about and who is making it. (The epistemology of this issue is very similar to that of the epistemology of testimony.) Lycan invites a comparison in plausibility between Moore's claim that he has hands and the philosophical assumption that every object has proper parts that are themselves substances. That philosophical assumption is not one that most non-philosophers would even understand: What is a proper part? What is a substance? By default they would find the familiar Moorean claim more plausible.

This, however, does not settle matters in Moore's favour. By the same reckoning, most non-scientists would find Moore's common sense claim more plausible than the claims that DNA molecules contain alleles or that photons lack mass. It is hard to see that this observation amounts to a telling criticism of either science or of philosophy.

Lycan appeals to claims which common sense finds plausible. But why restrict ourselves to what is plausible according to common sense? There are other reliable sources of information. For example, there is what is plausible according to modern science (Smart 1966). Now what is plausible according to one such source need not be plausible according to another of the same sort. Moreover, in some cases, what is plausible according to one source is implausible according to another of a different sort. There have been conflicts between scientific and common sense claims, and, at least in some cases, the common sense claims have reasonably been revised.² If conflicts between science and common sense can reasonably be settled in favour of science, a reason needs to be given for thinking that conflicts between philosophy and common sense cannot reasonably be settled in favour of philosophy.

This also raises a question about the force of Moore's argument from certainty. If that argument shows that philosophy is not licensed to change our pre-philosophical opinions, then it seems that the same line of reasoning is available to show that science is not licensed to change our pre-scientific opinions. After all, many people have been more confident that whales are fish, that glass is not a liquid, or that the coldness of an ice cube is transmitted to the drink it floats in, than any scientific theory that says otherwise. Moore's argument threatens to prove too much.³

Richard Feldman's response to the above point is to allow that empirical results may show that we lack knowledge in certain cases, and then to restrict the argument from certainty as an argument against only "highly abstract philosophical arguments for skepticism" (Feldman 2001, §3). Unfortunately, he provides no reason for maintaining this restricted version of the argument from certainty. It is not clear why empirical results supporting scepticism about our knowledge in some area should have an evidential force that no philosophical argument for scepticism can match. In the absence of a reason for this asymmetrical attitude to empirical results and philosophical argument, Feldman's restriction seems *ad hoc*.

The Moorean may concede that science has corrected some commonly held claims, but deny that those claims were common sense ones. For example, science's discovery that the Sun does not orbit the Earth revised common opinions. David Armstrong, however, queries the extent of the revision:

2 McCloskey (1983), and Wolpert (2000, 2–4) each offer examples of errors in common sense thinking about motion.

3 Noah Lemos (2004) presents a book-length defence of common sense. Yet the book's discussion of the critical bearing of science on common sense beliefs is relatively impoverished, as Barber (2007, 179) notes.

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