

# **The Poverty of Analysis**

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# Plan

- Philosophy as Synthetic Theorizing
- Not a Revisionary Thesis
- The Unimportance of Empirical Data
- Philosophers who Misdemean their Practice
- The Method of Possible Cases
- A Priori/A Posteriori
- Modal Knowledge

# Philosophy as Synthetic Theorizing

I say that philosophy, just like science, aims at true synthetic claims about the actual world, to be evaluated in the same way as scientific claims are evaluated.

It does not analyze concepts in order to arrive at analytic truth.

# Not a Revisionary Thesis

I don't take this claim to be revisionary about philosophical practice (contra eg Stich or Kornblith).

I think philosophers should go on studying eg the nature of universals, using armchair methods (including thought experiments about possible cases).

# Not a Revisionary Thesis

Two points:

a It doesn't follow from my claim that philosophical questions must be settled by empirical data.

b Many of those who say they are doing conceptual analysis are not.

# **The Unimportance of Empirical Data**

Some philosophical claims do pretty obviously answer to empirical data: interactive dualism, libertarian free will, . . .

But other philosophical issues are too general to have any empirical data to call their own.

And others are generated by theoretical tangles, not shortage of data.

# Philosophers who Misdemean their Practice (I)

Some confuse synthetic theorizing with conceptual analysis because they are in the grip of verificationist views of meaning.

They think of concepts as constituted by dispositions to apply terms in response to evidence, and so don't really distinguish between concepts and theories.

Thus Brandon eg talks about assessing and criticizing concepts in the light of evidence. I'm all for this—just don't call it conceptual analysis.

# Philosophers who Misdemean their Practice (II)

If concepts are constituted by theories, we need a better model.

Suppose  $T(F)$  is our theory involving concept  $F$ .

Then the Ramsey sentence corresponding to  $T(F)$  is ' $\exists\Phi(T(\Phi))$ '. This is clearly a synthetic claim, and quite independent of the content of  $F$  (it doesn't even use  $F$ ).

The Carnap sentence corresponding to ' $\exists\Phi(T(\Phi))$ ' is 'If  $\exists\Phi(T(\Phi)$ , then  $T(F)$ '. This can be regarded as fixing the content of  $F$  and correspondingly as analytic.



# **Philosophers who Misdemean their Practice (II)**

Some who are supposed to know this stuff still confuse synthetic theorizing with conceptual analysis.

Thus the Canberra planners say that we need to start with everyday thinking to set the agenda for 'serious metaphysics' and the 'location problem'.

# Philosophers who Misdemean their Practice (II)

But why think that this is conceptual analysis? Surely it's the synthetic Ramsey sentence that sets the agenda, not the analytic Carnap sentence.

Plenty of other philosophers outside Canberra also confuse an interest in everyday theories with conceptual analysis.

# The Method of Possible Cases

But what about the methodology of possible cases? We disprove philosophical theories by imagining possible counterexamples. (Gettier, Kripke.) Doesn't this show that the theories must be conceptual?

Not necessarily. In science we often discredit manifestly synthetic theories by imagining possible cases—eg Galileo on falling bodies.

Here we use everyday synthetic intuitions to cast doubt on synthetic theories.

# The Method of Possible Cases

Is this a good analogy? Galileo was guessing what would be observed in an actual case. His synthetic intuition was potentially falsifiable.

But there doesn't seem any room for actual observations to disprove the synthetic intuition that accidentally true justified beliefs aren't knowledge, or that the satisfier of the descriptions associated with a name doesn't bear it if it didn't originate its use.

# The Method of Possible Cases

What if the relevant assumptions are encapsulated in our judgmental procedures?

That would explain why direct observational disproof is ruled out even though they are synthetic.

# The Method of Possible Cases

Does anything prove that philosophical intuitions are synthetic rather than analytic?

Strong externalists (Williamson) argue that no such intuitions are essential to the relevant concepts, and so can't be analytic.

But we can also point out that, if the intuitions were analytic, philosophical thought experiments would be far less interesting than they are—they'd just tell us about our concepts, and not about knowledge and names themselves.

# A Priori/A Posteriori

Very similar thoughts about philosophical thought experiments are developed in Tim Williamson's book 'The Philosophy of Philosophy'. Yet he wants to deny that the intuitive information we use to discredit philosophical theories is a posteriori.

He agrees it's synthetic, but that's different. His thought is that the intuitive information isn't based on explicit induction from observations or anything like that. He thinks the a priori/a posteriori distinction breaks down here.

# A Priori/A Posteriori

***I'm not fussed about a priori/a posteriori, but we do need to be careful about the authority of philosophical intuitions. Williamson suggests that they are generally decisive.***

However, where do they come from? Evolution? Culture? Early experience? None is particularly reliable. This is backed up by the findings of 'X-phi', which show that different people differ significantly in their philosophical intuitions, and thus that such intuitions can't be generally reliable.

I think we should view such intuitions as nothing more than unexamined common sense ideas, and be ready to override them when necessary.



# Modal Knowledge

Isn't philosophy after necessary truths, not just the kind of contingencies that science trades in?

Certainly many of those who think that philosophy starts with concepts think that it goes from there to modal knowledge (and hence in some cases to knowledge of actuality)--Chalmers, Jackson, Bealer .

First point. Science often trades in necessities too (necessary/contingent is orthogonal to analytic/synthetic). Philosophy is likewise concerned with synthetic necessities.

# Modal Knowledge

Modal claims can be interesting to philosophers, but the epistemological route is actual -> modal, not conceptual -> modal -> actual.

That's how it goes eg in the mind-brain case.

# Modal Knowledge

Sometimes it is heuristically helpful to raise the modal issue. We know A and B go hand in hand in the actual world. But do we think of them as correlated or identical?

So we ask ourselves if they could come apart. But even here we are simply checking the modal implications to ascertain our synthetic beliefs about the actual world.

# Conclusion

All in all, there is no reason to doubt that philosophy as currently practised is engaged in pretty much the same kind of synthetic theorizing as the rest of science.