Conceptual analysis

A distinction must be made between the philosophical theory of conceptual analysis and the historical philosophical movement of Conceptual Analysis.

The theory of conceptual analysis holds that concepts - general meanings of linguistic predicates - are the fundamental objects of philosophical inquiry, and that insights into conceptual contents are expressed in necessary 'conceptual truths' (analytic propositions). There are two methods for obtaining these truths:

(1) direct a priori definition of concepts;
(2) indirect 'transcendental' argumentation.

The movement of Conceptual Analysis arose at Cambridge during the first half of the twentieth century, and flourished at Oxford and many American departments of philosophy in the 1950s and early 1960s. In the USA its doctrines came under heavy criticism, and its proponents were not able to respond effectively; by the end of the 1970s the movement was widely regarded as defunct. This reversal of fortunes can be traced primarily to the conjunction of several powerful objections: the attack on intensions and on the analytic/synthetic distinction; the paradox of analysis; the 'scientific essentialist' theory of propositions; and the critique of transcendental arguments. Nevertheless a closer examination indicates that each of these objections presupposes a covert appeal to concepts and conceptual truths. In the light of this dissonance between the conventional wisdom of the critics on the one hand, and the implicit commitments of their arguments on the other, there is a manifest need for a careful re-examination of conceptual analysis.

1 Origins and career of Conceptual Analysis

Many of the elements of Conceptual Analysis are present already in John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) - in his doctrines of general ideas and definitions (decompositions of complex general ideas into sets of simple ideas); in his distinction between 'trifling' and 'instructive' universally certain propositions; and in his closely related distinction between 'intuitive' and 'demonstrative' knowledge (see Locke, J. §§3-4). An even more important source of influence is Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787). There Kant makes three crucial sets of distinctions. The first is between 'analytic' and 'synthetic' propositions, that is, between propositions true by virtue of conceptual content alone, and propositions true by virtue of conceptual content together with a non-conceptual semantic element ('intuition'). The second is between a priori (necessary, experience-independent) and a posteriori (contingent, experience-dependent) truths. The third is a threefold division between proofs by empirical methods, 'constructive' proofs in mathematics, and 'transcendental' proofs. Transcendental proofs establish the truth of non-mathematical synthetic a priori propositions by showing how the natural sciences - and human experience itself - presuppose a set of primitive pure concepts or 'categories' (see Kant, I. §4).

Kant's important idea that conceptual truths can be either analytic a priori or synthetic a priori is effectively erased by Gottlob Frege in his *Foundations of Arithmetic* (1884). Frege's overriding philosophical aim is to put mathematical proof on a firm footing by reducing the truths of arithmetic to analytic truths of logic. In view of this, the proper goal of an analysis is the production of non-circular, explanatory, yet meaning-preserving general definitions of fundamental concepts - as exemplified in Frege's famous definition of a number as a class of equinumerous classes (see Logicism; Frege, G. §§7-8). Analytic a priori truths for Frege are propositions that follow deductively either from the self-evident, unprovable laws of pure logic alone, or else from the laws of logic together with logical definitions.

Frege's method was enthusiastically developed and subtly transformed by G.E. Moore in what may be regarded as the first phase of Conceptual Analysis. Moore supplemented Frege's austere logicism with a Kant-inspired attentiveness to the multiplicity of different sorts of concepts, propositions and logico-semantic relations, and with a predilection for arguments resting on appeals to common sense (see Moore, G.E. §§3-4). Moorean analysis then travelled from Cambridge to Oxford, where J.L. Austin and Gilbert Ryle added to it a special focus on the uses and abuses of ordinary language. This led directly to the vigorous growth in the 1950s of the second phase of Conceptual Analysis, sometimes also called 'Oxford Philosophy'. Conceptual analysis was exported to the USA in

the 1950s and early 1960s, primarily through the writings of H.P. Grice and P.F. Strawson. While it found a niche for a time in many American philosophy departments, it did not ultimately survive. It was attacked on several fronts by leading American philosophers (most damagingly, perhaps, by W.V. Quine - see §3 of this entry for details), and by the end of the 1970s had largely succumbed.

2 The theory and methods of conceptual analysis

The career of Conceptual Analysis was rather brief and embattled, but its underlying philosophical theory, conceptual analysis, should be analysed and judged on its own merits. For simplicity's sake, we can think of conceptual analysis as defined by the conjunction of the following five theses:

(1) *The content thesis.* A concept is a general content possessing intrinsic, individuating structures and relations (an intension), and having a corresponding application either to sets of actual or possible objects (an extension), or to other concepts.
(2) *The linguistic thesis.* A concept is the meaning of a predicate-expression; and all such words have meanings only in the context of whole sentences used (first and foremost) in making statements in ordinary discourse.
(3) *The modal thesis.* Every true proposition expressing conceptual interconnections is necessary and analytic.
(4) *The knowledge thesis.* Purely conceptual inquiry produces important a priori knowledge. This knowledge is expressed in analytic propositions known to be true either by (a) direct definitional analysis of conceptual contents, or by (b) indirect 'transcendental' arguments.
(5) *The metaphilosophical thesis.* All fundamental philosophical errors arise from misunderstandings of concepts, and can be corrected only by proper conceptual analyses.

The first two theses convey a theory of concepts. Being general, concepts play the role traditionally assigned to universals (see Universals). Yet because they are ontologically dependent upon ordinary language, concepts are not otherworldly, Platonic entities. And because concept-possession depends upon linguistic use and mastery, concepts are immediately accessible to all competent speakers.

Concepts bear necessary relations to one another and also have fixed internal structures; these relations and structures are open to the process of analysis; and a capacity for analytical insight is guaranteed by linguistic mastery. Concepts, however, are of two quite different sorts: 'categorematic' and 'syncategorematic'. Categorematic concepts (for example, 'bachelor' or 'being taller than') are 'material' intensional contents that uniquely and independently determine concept-extensions. Syncategorematic concepts, by contrast, are 'formal' intensions that apply in a rule-like way to other concepts or conceptual complexes. These in turn are of two sorts:

(1) 'logical concepts' (such as 'conjunction') expressing logical operations; and
(2) 'categorical concepts' (such as 'objecthood') expressing higher-order conditions of the applicability of lower-order concepts.

Analytical insight into categorematic and syncategorematic concepts permits the capture of both non-logical and logical truths (for example, 'bachelors are unmarried males' and '$\sim (P \ \& \ \sim P)$') within the general class of conceptual truths.

The modal thesis tells us that all conceptual truths are analytic and necessary; such truths reflect conceptual contents alone and bear no connections to the disposition of things in the actual world or any possible world. They are therefore 'topic-neutral'. This makes is relatively easy to see why, as the knowledge thesis asserts, the cognition of analytic propositions is a priori: the insight into conceptual content requires no appeal to empirical facts or individuals. And certainly in the case of such simple definitional propositions as 'bachelors are unmarried males', it appears to be the case that a direct awareness of conceptual identity - guaranteed by linguistic competence and the grasp of word-synonymy - requires no appeal to experience in order to be known. But the very idea of a conceptual identity is not so simple as one might think; nor does insight into conceptual truth always result from definitional inquiries alone. This is manifest in three ways.

In the first place, definitional truths do express conceptual identities or synonymies of words, but the criterion of identity cannot be merely that concepts are identical, or words synonymous, when they share the same extensions necessarily. The concepts 'creature with a heart' and 'creature with a kidney', for example, share actual extensions, but are clearly not identical. And as C.I. Lewis first pointed out in 'Modes of Meaning' (1943-4) there

are also concepts - such as ‘equilateral triangle’ and ‘equiangular triangle’ - that are necessarily co-extensional, but not precisely identical. Hence a stricter criterion of conceptual identity, involving an isomorphism of the concepts’ internal structures, must be invoked.

In the second place, there are analytic propositions expressing conceptual relations that reflect only partial identities of concepts, for example: (A) ’bachelors are males’. And most logical truths appear not to reflect *either* complete *or* partial conceptual identities. Here, however, it is possible to appeal to a criterion of analyticity used by Kant, namely that the denial of an analytic proposition leads to a contradiction. This is closely connected with the idea that when terms in partially definitional propositions *are* replaced by their full definitions, or perfect synonyms, logical truths will result. Thus substituting ’unmarried males’ into (A) for ’bachelors’ produces the logical truth, (A*) ’unmarried males are males’. The denial of (A*) is obviously logically contradictory. So an a priori grasp of conceptual identities and logical concepts appears to be sufficient for knowledge of definitional propositions and logical truths alike.

Third, however, there are conceptually true propositions, such as (B) ’nothing can be simultaneously coloured in two different ways all over’ and (C) ’the world as we experience it contains reidentifiable objective particulars in a single spatiotemporal scheme’, that do not seem to reflect logical truths, or even complete or partial identities of concepts, but rather conceptual connections of a somewhat different sort. Here we are strongly reminded of Kant’s view that some conceptual truths are not analytic, but instead synthetic. And indeed, although conceptual analysts generally eschew the existence of the synthetic a priori, this is precisely where the appeal to transcendental arguments comes in. A transcendental argument aims to show that a proposition *P* (say, (B) or (C)) is conceptually true because it is presupposed by another proposition *Q* (say, ’*a* is red; so it is not green’ or ’*a* is not being perceived by me now; but it is still over there just the same’), which is taken by hypothesis to be perfectly acceptable and a ‘paradigm case’ of some class of statements. Not only is *P* a necessary condition of the truth of *Q*, but more profoundly *P* is a necessary condition of the *real possibility* or *meaningfulness* of *Q* - of its being true or false in the first place. This is because the concepts expressed in *P* are categorial concepts having a ’conceptual priority’ over the concepts expressed in *Q*, which is to say that the concepts in *P* have a central place in the overall ’conceptual scheme’ by which language-using human beings organize their common sense experience in the ways exemplified by *Q*. Thus the conceptual truth (B) expresses an insight about the very nature of human experience of colour; and the conceptual truth (C) expresses an insight about the very nature of human perception of objects. Transcendental arguments thus extend the scope of conceptual analysis from the mere definitional or logical exploration of conceptual contents (sometimes also called ’philosophical grammar’), towards insights into first principles expressing the ‘conceptual geography’ of the common sense world (see Transcendental arguments).

The metaphilosophical thesis follows directly from the other four. Concepts govern the ways we think about all things and other concepts; thus not only all philosophical truths, but also all philosophical errors, are conceptual. The two methods of conceptual analysis - definitional and transcendental - must be employed not merely as means of philosophical insight but also for the unmasking and diagnosis of conceptual confusions.

3 Five fundamental objections

The many different lines and styles of criticism directed against conceptual analysis tend to converge on five basic objections:

(1) *The flight from intensions.* If concepts are linguistic intensions, then obviously any sceptical argument showing that intensions do not exist will undermine the linguistic thesis. Just such an argument has been influentially promoted by Quine, in two parts. First, intensions are said to be either ontologically ’mysterious’ or purely psychological entities that intervene between language (or linguistic behaviour) and reference, and should be ruled out of any properly logical and scientific approach to semantic issues. Second, all the explanatory roles traditionally played by intensions - as what words signify, as truth-vehicles, as grounds of synonymy, as grounds of modality, as objects of the propositional attitudes, and as objects of philosophical analysis - can be functionally mimicked by logical or linguistic devices that make no appeals whatsoever to intensional entities (see Intensional entities).

(2) *The death of analyticity.* Perhaps even more famous than Quine’s attack on intensions is his attack, in ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’ (1951), on the very idea of analyticity (see Quine, W.V. §8). Setting aside logical truth, Quine argues that non-logical analyticity is based on the concept of synonymy. But every plausible attempt to give

an explanation of synonymy (by appeal to the notions of definition, linguistic interchangeability, or semantical rules) ends either in circularity or vacuity. In the absence of a clear account of synonymy, no clear boundary between analytic and synthetic (factual, contingent) propositions can be established. If sound, this argument forces the rejection of the modal thesis (see Analyticity).

(3) *The paradox of analysis.* In 'Moore's Notion of Analysis' (1942), C.H. Langford points up a deep difficulty in the conception of a definitional analysis. In order for a proposition expressing the results of such an analysis to be correct or true, it must establish a complete or partial identity between concepts. But if an identity is so established, then the very same concept, wholly or in part, redundantly shows up twice in the same conceptual truth, as expressed by two different words or phrases. Thus every correct definitional analysis of a concept is non-informative and trivial; and the very project of definitionally analysing a concept is epistemically pointless. If true, it follows directly from the paradox that the first part of the Knowledge Thesis, which states that all conceptual truths express important a priori knowledge, is false.

(4) *Scientific essentialism and the contingency of conceptual truths.* Enshrined in the linguistic thesis, the modal thesis and the knowledge thesis, are claims to the effect that the meanings of words are conceptual intensions, and that conceptual truths are analytic, a priori and necessary. But it has been influentially argued by Hilary Putnam (1975) that the extensions of some general words - 'natural-kind' terms such as 'water' or 'cats' - are not in fact determined by their corresponding concepts. The extension of a natural-kind word, says Putnam, is instead determined by a strict relation of identity between the natural kind and the microphysical stuff that locally predominates in the samples used by scientists in their empirical investigations (see Reference §3). The stuff's physical microstructure - say, water's being H_2O - is its scientific *essence*; and propositions expressing this essence - say, 'Water is H_2O' - are necessary and a posteriori. But this immediately implies that the conceptual propositions expressed by the use of sentences including natural-kind terms will not be necessary truths. For example, consider the apparently necessary (because analytic by partial definition) proposition 'Water is a liquid'. The natural-kind word 'water' will pick out only whatever stuff in a given world has the microstructure H_2O. But it is possible that on a different world, under different physical conditions, the stuff that is H_2O and a liquid here on Earth might look very different and have very different surface properties: it might be solid, for example. So the conceptual proposition 'Water is a liquid' is false in that possible world; and thus it is only contingently true in the actual world, even if grasped a priori.

(5) *Transcendental arguments presuppose verificationism.* Even supposing that definitional conceptual truths are empty tautologies, and not always necessary, still conceptual truths gained by transcendental arguments would remain cognitively significant and modally secure. But as Barry Stroud (1968) has pointed out, the theory of transcendental arguments assumes a strongly verificationistic theory of meaningfulness for concepts and propositions. Verificationism, however, is afflicted with insurmountable problems. So transcendental arguments are semantically suspect, and the second part of the Knowledge Thesis would thereby seem to be undermined too.

4 The inescapability of conceptual analysis

On the assumption that these criticisms are sound, things look very bleak for conceptual analysis. And it is true that the movement of Conceptual Analysis did eventually break up under the weight of the criticisms just described. But a closer inspection reveals a striking feature of the philosophical dialectic: In order to gain the acceptance of any argument aimed *against* conceptual analysis, it appears that the critic must finally appeal to the truth of some premises that implicitly invoke concepts and conceptual truths.

To take only one central example. Quine's famous arguments against intensions and analyticity all assume the notion of a logical truth. According to Quine in 'Truth by Convention' (1936), a logical truth is a sentence that contains certain words (logical constants) 'essentially': these words preserve their interpretations across every uniform assignment of values to the non-logical constants in the sentence, ensuring that it 'comes out true' no matter what. Now logical constants, with their 'essential occurrence', are semantically equivalent to the conceptual analyst's *logical concepts*; and in this way Quinean logical truths are (covertly) conceptual truths. Moreover, although Quine suggests in 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' (1951) that even logical truths are revisable, he states in his later *Philosophy of Logic* that 'every logical truth is obvious, actually or potentially' ([1970] 1986: 82), and that the very attempt to deny a logical truth would involve a change of meaning of the logical constants. In other words, logical constants and logical truths are ineliminable parts of any rational conceptual scheme recognizable as

our own. This recognition is epistemically equivalent to what conceptual analysts mean by the a priori grasp of a conceptual truth; the only difference is that whereas most analysts hold that logical truths are known and justified by direct conceptual insight, Quine persuasively appeals instead to a transcendental proof.

If sound, this argument smoothly generalizes. No philosopher can do without logic; and if logic is itself necessarily such as to contain concepts and conceptual truths that are grasped a priori, and whose existence and validity can be established only via transcendental argument, then no philosopher can ultimately avoid the analysis of concepts. Supposing that conceptual analysis is - even in this minimalistic way - philosophically inescapable, the demand for a re-examination and re-working of its basic theses seems self-evident.

See also: Analytical philosophy; Concepts; Meaning and verification

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