Naturalism vs. Conceptual Analysis

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This lecture might be deliberately biased against conceptual analysis.
Presentation Plan

• Conceptual Analysis (CA) and dogmatism
• How to wake up from the dogmatic slumber
• Naturalizing everything
Conceptual Analysis and Dogmatism

- Introducing the central dogma of analytical philosophy:

  The proper way to do philosophy is to do conceptual analysis.

- ... and this is what I will deny.
What you are supposed get with conceptual analysis?

Definitions of concepts. And conceptual truths using those definitions.
The Justification Problem

• The problem is that in most cases, you actually can define your concept any way you want. It's not even forbidden to use stipulative definitions in philosophy.

• So how would you justify your definition?
Justifying the Analysis

- Here are some candidates:
  - Intuition, including reflective equilibrium
  - Use in everyday language
  - Use in scientific language
  - Fiat
  - Transcendental argument
Dogmatism in all cases but one

• In reality, only one case is better than defining by *fiat*

• And those are transcendental arguments

• But they are a rare species...
Intuition

- If you say that your intuition is what justifies the analysis, somebody else might say she has a different intuition.
- Some people might even try to check the intuitions among non-philosophers. This is what experimental philosophy is about.
Intuition

• The core problem is that it's hard to see what intuition is and why it's reliable.
• You cannot simply say that your intuitions are incorrigible and always correct.
• If you do maths, you sometime have incorrect intuitions and might be proven wrong with a proof.
Intuition

- If you rely on your intuition to say, for example, what a dispositional property is, how do you actually use it?
- Where does the knowledge of dispositional properties come from?
- Are you ready to defend a strong version of Platonism in face of thousands of definitions of a “dispositional property”?
The worst case scenario is that philosophers simply create multiple formally correct stipulative definitions, but these definitions have no significance for philosophy at all. They are all disposable. You can define your terms differently.

But you may also create a whole industry of fake analysis this way.
Intuition & Reflective Equilibrium

- A better scenario is where you start with intuition, but use arguments to refine your starting point.
- You end up with a different definition than you started with.
- Yet, how do you defend the arguments and tools used? How to make them non-arbitrary?
this fish is wearing a squirrel

your argument is invalid
Use of everyday language

- So you might be tempted to say that the meaning of the concept is to be found in the use of the term that denotes the concept.
- So far so good, but how is your position different from lexicography?
- What does it have to do with philosophy?
Use of everyday language

- Experimental philosophers might even use surveys to test what terms mean for non-philosophers.
- But why would you bother?
- Alan Turing claimed that Gallup-style surveys for what 'mind' means would be absurd. I think this is true of many works in x-phi.
Use of everyday language

• The problem with everyday language is obvious: we have terms that are definitely misleading, such as “sunrise”.

• You don't want to say that the Copernican theory must be false because we have a concept of a sunrise in everyday language.

• And the same goes for almost all terms in everyday language.
Use of everyday language

• An additional problem is that the analysis of use should not be based simply on a few manually-selected examples.

• This is not how linguists check what a term means in a language. If they want to have empirically-informed definitions, they use large samples of text (corpora) and statistics.
Use of everyday language

• But philosophers such as Ryle and Austin did not focus on just any concept. They didn't do lexicography.

• They focused on the procedures we use to give meaning to words, and on what makes them meaningful.

• But the scope of such analysis is much more limited than you think!
Everyday language and metaphysics

- Some people took Strawson's descriptive metaphysics as a project to do metaphysics by describing just anything.
- But in Strawson's book, the analysis was transcendental (as could be seen in his later work on Kant). Other accounts necessarily end up as equally arbitrary.
Use of scientific language

- Scientific language has an obvious advantage over everyday language: it's harder to play the “sunrise” argument against it.
- But we know that many scientific theories turned out to be false. We may play a flogiston game.
Use of scientific language

• You might try to defend the view that you're interested in *ideal* scientific language.

• Now that's interesting: how would you know your *current* definition actually picks the *ideal* term?
Fiat

- So you might go the purely constructive way. You simply have stipulative definitions.

- That's OK but why should it be interesting for philosophy?

- If your definition is stipulative, then in any argument, you would be begging a question. Bad, bad, bad.
Fiat

- So you might say you're not actually arguing for anything.
- Now that's a bizarre position: you have an artificial philosophical vocabulary but you don't use it.
Irrelevant or dogmatic?

- So in all previous cases we have a similar problem: your analysis is either dogmatic, or irrelevant for others.
- Is this actually the proper way to do philosophy?!
- Note: a preliminary definition won't do here. You need a correct definition to get at conceptual truths. Otherwise, you're doomed.
How to wake up from the dogmatic slumber
Waking up from the dogmatic slumber

- Here comes the last possibility from my list:
- Transcendental or dialectical arguments
- But they are hard to use
Transcendental / Dialectical Argument

- First, your opponent should be using the very concept you want to analyze.
- The analysis you offer should reflect her use.
- The justification will be limited: your analysis will be relevant only to the uses of your opponent. It's not an absolute justification.
Transcendental / Dialectical Argument

• In their transcendental version, dialectical arguments have two parts:
  • Statement of facts, or the metaphysical deduction, which is simply stating how the concept is being used.
  • Justification, or the transcendental deduction, which is roughly equivalent to the analysis of the concept.
But this is hard

• But you cannot actually apply this scheme to any concept.

• Such concepts as qualia, or zombies, or categorical properties do not seem to be candidates - unless you argue with someone that shares a lot with you.

• Yet, this is the only way to avoid dogmatic slumber.
Naturalizing everything

Now, why did I mention naturalism?
Naturalism and avoiding dogmatism

- Philosophical naturalism is such a broad movement that it's really hard to pin down.

- The most interesting point is that many proponents of naturalism do not offer any conceptual analysis. They are simply not interested with definitions...
No definitions?!

- Daniel Dennett does not seem to be interested much in defining religion in his book on religion...

- William Wimsatt does not try to define the notion of level, he only describes several dozens of properties of level-like phenomena...
What does that mean?

- Bluntly, naturalism is another way to do philosophy.
- Naturalists do use tools of analytical philosophy, such as rational reconstruction, but they are not interested with conceptual truths...
Naturalizing conceptual truths

• The problem is that for many naturalists, there is no practical way to distinguish between logical necessity / possibility and natural necessity / possibility.

• ... and that distinction is necessary to make conceptual truths so important.
Naturalizing conceptual truths

• Simply saying that we can conceive of something as non-contradictory is hand-waving.

• We know that we fall prey to conceptual illusions and do not see contradictions if the logical structure is complex enough.

• Are you necessarily smarter than Frege?
Naturalizing conceptual truths

- In other words, you cannot make your concepts correct independently from what you know.
- And what you know is always fallible. Including your supposedly eternal conceptual truths.
Natural kinds

• Another thing is that natural kinds, or natural phenomena, such as biological species, religion, cognitive mechanisms etc., are very hard to define.

• It's more interesting to describe them rather than to define them.
What it is like to naturalize?

- Naturalism, as opposed to conceptual analysis, is interested in accounts of real-world phenomena. Not in definitions.

- The task of naturalizing might be realized by:
  - showing that non-naturalistic accounts (non-scientific, supernatural) are false, disposable etc.
  - showing how science might account for phenomena in question.
What it is like to naturalize?

- Showing how science might account for phenomena in question is basically showing how you could apply methods of science.
- In this respect, naturalism is always primarily methodological.
What it is like to naturalize?

- Science does not account for all interesting phenomena, so naturalistic philosophers are busy with coming up with stories how it might deal with them.
- In most interesting cases, they offer something like a candidate for a scientific theory (cognitive anthropology of religion, massive modularity etc.)
And why is that not dogmatic?

- Remember the structure of transcendental arguments?
- Naturalism simply assumes that the best possible source for description of facts is science.
- And then it tries to justify an account of how we should understand those facts.
- In this respect, it's more Kantian than Humean.
So what would this naturalism be?

- If you come up with accounts that show how natural methods are applicable to explain phenomena that were thought to be miracles, you're a naturalist.
- And you probably don't really care about dispositional/categorical distinction as it seems to make no difference for science.
- As many other epicycles in analytical philosophy.
Summary

• If you're not in Canberra, you probably have no excuse for doing conceptual analysis that is not backed up by a transcendental argument.

• In other words: conceptual analysis is far less interesting for philosophers that are busy with naturalizing. In most cases, all they need is to point to phenomena and then describe them.
Thank you for your attention!

This bear has no friends.
Your argument is invalid.