Discussions

The Role of the Ethnomethodological Experiment in the Empirical Investigation of Social Norms and Its Application to Conceptual Analysis

ULLIN T. PLACE
University of Wales, Bangor

It is argued that conceptual analysis as practiced by the philosophers of ordinary language, is an empirical procedure that relies on a version of Garfinkel's ethnomethodological experiment. The ethnomethodological experiment is presented as a procedure in which the existence and nature of a social norm is demonstrated by flouting the putative convention and observing what reaction that produces in the social group within which the convention is assumed to operate. Examples are given of the use of ethnomethodological experiments, both in vivo and as a thought experiment, in order to demonstrate the existence of otherwise invisible conventions governing human social behavior. Comparable examples are cited from the writings of ordinary language philosophers of ethnomethodological thought experiments designed to demonstrate the existence of linguistic conventions.

I. THE LIQUIDATION OF PHILOSOPHY

The idea behind this essay is one that has been with me since I was an undergraduate at Oxford in the period immediately following the end of the Second World War. I was studying philosophy and psy-

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This essay is a revised and extended version of a paper presented at the First International Conference on Understanding Language Use in Everyday Life, held at the University of Calgary, August 1989. I should like to acknowledge my debt to the former Wilde Reader in Mental Philosophy at Oxford, Brian Farrell, both for alerting me to the

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chology in what was then the brand-new Honours School of Philosophy, Psychology, and Physiology. Those were heady days when philosophy at Oxford was undergoing a revolution from which emerged what came to be called "ordinary language philosophy."

To those of us who were caught up in that revolution, particularly those, such as myself, who were interested in the development of psychology as a hard-nosed empirical and experimental science, it appeared that we were witnessing the final act in a process that had been going on since the seventeenth century whereby one after another new empirical sciences had split off from philosophy. In the Middle Ages, philosophy encompassed any pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, as the institution of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy as the principal research degree in *any* academic discipline reminds us. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, natural philosophy had separated out from its parent along the lines of fracture prescribed by Descartes's dualism of mind and matter and had evolved into the natural empirical sciences of physics, chemistry, and biology. Then, in the nineteenth century, it was the mental and moral sciences' turn to break away. First economics, then sociology, anthropology, and finally psychology were established as independent sciences.

In the case of psychology, the process of emancipation from philosophy had hitherto been regarded as incomplete—except by the behaviorists, who had bought their freedom from domination by philosophy at the expense of withdrawing from what had previously been regarded as the central issue of the discipline, the study of consciousness. Now, ordinary language philosophy was attacking that last bastion of philosophy's claim to its own proprietary subject matter —the mind-body problem—and exposing it as conceptual confusion.

II. CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

The foundation of Oxford ordinary language philosophy was the discovery of the technique known as "conceptual analysis." This

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implications of ordinary language philosophy for empirical psychology, sociology, and linguistics and, more specifically, for the observation (personal communication) that ordinary language philosophers were using a form of introspection to throw light on their own linguistic habits, which, it was assumed, mirrored those endorsed by the linguistic community as a whole.

discovery should probably be attributed to Wittgenstein during the phase of his thinking represented by the so-called *Blue and Brown Books* (Wittgenstein 1958), typescript versions of which were widely circulated during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Conceptual analysis may be described as a method of elucidating the meaning of words and expressions whose meaning is fixed by customary usage rather than by stipulative definition. Although it can, in principle, be applied to the elucidation of the words and expressions of any language or technical code in which the practitioner is fluent, it has in practice been applied only to the words and expressions of nontechnical natural language as they occur in everyday usage (ordinary language).

In essence, the idea of conceptual analysis is a simple deduction from Frege's (1884/1950) principle that the meaning of a word or expression is the contribution that it makes to the various sentences of which it forms a part. It is a consequence of Frege's principle that in order to throw light on the meaning of a word or expressions we need to study the different kinds of sentence and the place within those sentences in which the word or expression in question can meaningfully occur. To do that is to do conceptual analysis. But although the idea is simple enough, like many simple ideas, its ramifications, in particular, its implications for the view that is taken of the nature of philosophical inquiry, are far-reaching.

The view of the nature of philosophical inquiry, which was characteristic of the Oxford ordinary language school, took as its starting point the assumption that there are two kinds of intellectual issue: conceptual issues and empirical issues. Conceptual issues concern the meaning of words and are to be decided by conceptual analysis. Empirical issues concern matters of fact and are decided by making the appropriate observations. Conceptual issues are the concern of philosophers. Empirical issues are the concern of the relevant empirical science or textual research discipline. The traditional problems of philosophy, it was held, have two sources:

1. They depend on a confusion between conceptual and empirical issues.
2. They depend on conceptual confusions, in other words, confusions about the meaning of words.

These confusions, it was thought, can always be cleared up by paying close attention to the way the words in question are used in ordinary language in everyday nonphilosophical contexts.

III. FINDING EMPLOYMENT FOR PHILOSOPHERS ONCE PHILOSOPHY IS LIQUIDATED

It is a consequence of this view that once the conceptual confusions involved in the traditional problems of philosophy have been dealt with in this way there will be nothing more for the philosopher to do, apart from tackling any new conceptual confusions that may arise in the future. This raised the urgent problem of how professional philosophers were to occupy themselves once all the major philosophical issues of the past have been resolved in this way. The solution to this problem, which recommended itself to those of us who thought about such matters at the time, envisaged that once the traditional philosophical issues, such as the theory of knowledge, mind and body, the freedom of the will, ethics, and so forth had been dealt with, philosophers would have to use the skills they had acquired in exposing the conceptual confusions which had generated these problems in the service of what has since become known as "empirical sociolinguistics." Two prominent Oxford philosophers of the period who saw the need to take philosophy down this road were the late John Austin and my own tutor in philosophy at the time, the late Paul Grice. John Austin's (1962) *How to Do Things with Words* is the source for what Searle (1969) was later to call "speech act theory," while Grice (1975, 1978) went on to develop the theory of conversational implicature. Needless to say, both of these theories have been enormously influential in the subsequent development of empirical research in fields such as pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

IV. CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS AS AN EMPIRICAL ENQUIRY

Austin and Grice were well aware of the potential contribution of the conceptual analysis of ordinary language for empirical studies of the use of language in everyday life. What they were not prepared to recognize, at least not in public, was that conceptual analysis itself was a form of empirical investigation. Unfortunately, I did not have or, perhaps I should say, did not make an opportunity to raise this issue with John Austin, although I was, of course, well aware of his interests in taking philosophy into the area of empirical linguistics. I did, however, discuss the issue with Paul Grice on more than one occasion. My recollections of those discussions are extremely sketchy,

but as I reconstruct them now, Grice employed three arguments to rebut my suggestion that conceptual analysis is an empirical investigation into the way language is used. His first argument was that philosophers are concerned with discovering propositions that are analytic and thus true necessarily and a priori, not with matters of synthetic, contingent, and empirical fact. Second, he argued that philosophers are concerned with linguistic universals, principles that are true of language and thought in general, not with the peculiarities of different natural languages that are the concern of the student of empirical linguistics. His third argument was that if philosophers were concerned with matters of linguistic fact, they would be interested in statistical studies of the frequency with which different locutions are used in everyday discourse; in fact, such studies are of no philosophical interest whatsoever.

The first of these arguments can be rebutted relatively easily. It is true that what philosophers are concerned with are the kinds of relations between the meaning of words and expressions that render sentences like *All bachelors are unmarried men* or *Two is the only even prime* analytically true and their negations false. But what makes them analytically true are empirical facts about the meanings of those words in the relevant natural language, in this case English.[1]

The second argument is also fairly easily dealt with by pointing out that the features of language that are of interest to philosophers have no bearing one way or another on the question of whether the method that is used to investigate those features is or is not an empirical method. Nor is there any reason to think that the method of conceptual analysis, if it is applied in an indiscriminate and mechanical fashion, will always come up with linguistic features of the kind that are of interest to philosophers, rather than with peculiarities specific to a particular natural language. Indeed, I am conscious that I may be maligning Paul Grice's memory in even attributing this argument to him.

It is with the problem of answering the third argument that I am concerned in this essay. This is a problem that I have been wrestling with on and off for the past forty years and it is only within the past five years when I started to take an interest in ethnomethodology that the answer began to dawn.

It is quite evidently true that statistical evidence about the frequency of occurrence of certain linguistic practices does not impinge one way or the other on the kind of linguistic issue that interests

philosophers. What is less clear is why this should be. My suggestion is that philosophers are right to find no interest for them in the statistical frequency of different types of linguistic behavior for reasons that are closely related to those which lead ethnomethodologists to reject statistical frequency analysis as applied to all forms of social behavior. The ethnomethodologist's rejection of statistical frequency analysis differs from that of the philosopher in that it arises from an interest that the philosopher does not share in what people actually say and do on particular occasions. Measures of the statistical frequency of the occurrence of different varieties of behavior are rejected because such measures inevitably involve extracting particular instances from the context in which they occur, thereby ignoring those, often crucial, features of the situation that constrain what happens in the individual case. The most important of these features, which are "written out of the story" by a statistical frequency analysis, are the operative social norms and conventions, and it is in relation to the investigation of social norms and conventions, in the case of the philosopher the norms and conventions of linguistic usage, that the concerns of the two groups coincide.

If what you are interested in are the norms and conventions governing a particular variety of social behavior, a statistical study of the frequency of that behavior is going to tell you very little. The frequency of incidence cannot by itself distinguish between behavior that has a high natural frequency of occurrence in the absence of social sanctions designed to constrain it and behavior that has a low natural frequency in the absence of social sanctions designed to promote it. The same statistical frequency can be generated in either way.

V. GARFINKEL'S ENTHNOMETHODOLOGICAL EXPERIMENT

It is here that Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodological experiment comes to the rescue. As is well known, the ethnomethodological experiment was first described by Professor Garfinkel in an essay entitled "Studies of the Routine Grounds of Everyday Activities" (Garfinkel 1964/1967). He describes the method as follows:

> Procedurally it is my preference to start with familiar scenes and ask what can be done to make trouble. The operations that one would have to perform in order to multiply the senseless features of perceived environments; to produce and sustain bewilderment, consternation, and confusion; to produce the socially structured affects of anxiety,

> shame, guilt and indignation; and to produce disorganized interaction should tell us something about how the structures of everyday activities are ordinarily produced and maintained. (pp. 37-38)

Now I am conscious that in describing the procedure which Professor Garfinkel outlines in this passage as a method for determining the existence and nature of social norms and conventions, I am attributing to him, and through him to ethnomethodology, something that he has always insisted that ethnomethodology does not have and does not need, namely, a methodology. Ethnomethodology looks at other people's methodologies; it does not have a methodology of its own.

This is a view that I am afraid I cannot accept, not only because it seems to me that no inquiry can proceed without a methodology even if, as in most cases, the methodology is never explicitly stated but also because I believe that the ethnomethodological experiment described by Garfinkel in this passage is the only methodologically sound empirical procedure for determining the existence and nature of social norms and conventions.

The ethnomethodological experiment so conceived is the procedure whereby the existence and nature of a social norm or convention is demonstrated by flouting the putative convention and observing what reaction that produces in the social group within which the convention is assumed to operate. If the reaction is one of consternation, indignation, and hostility toward the perpetrator and if that reaction is calculated to produce feelings of guilt and shame in the perpetrator, it is a reasonable inference that an important convention has been isolated, conformity to which is maintained by the fear of provoking precisely those consequences.

Not surprisingly, examples of such ethnomethodological experiments carried out in vivo are relatively rare. In his essay, Garfinkel gives only one clear-cut example: the case where he asked his students

> to spend from fifteen minutes to an hour in their [own] homes imagining that they were boarders and acting out this assumption. They were instructed to conduct themselves in a circumspect and polite fashion. They were to avoid getting personal, to use formal address, to speak only when spoken to. (p. 47)

Typical reactions to this behavior on the part of the student are described as follows:

> Family members were stupefied. They vigorously sought to make the strange actions intelligible and to restore the situation to normal appearances. Reports were filled with accounts of astonishment, bewilder-

> ment, shock, anxiety, embarrassment, and anger, and with charges by various family members that the student was mean, inconsiderate, selfish, nasty or impolite. (p. 47)

Another example of an ethnomethodological experiment in vivo is described by Verplanck (1955). This experiment antedates ethnomethodology and was inspired by a quite different conceptual framework. It belongs to the literature on verbal conditioning, which had a brief vogue in social psychology in the late 1950s. It is of particular interest in that it illustrates the application of the convention reversal procedure in demonstrating the existence of an important convention of ordinary conversation. This is the convention whereby the listener is constrained to supply an appropriate "continuer," as the conversation analysts call such things, in the form of an expression of agreement in response to an opinion voiced by the speaker. Because his concern is with the conventions governing the speaker's contribution rather than with those that regulate the listener's response, this convention does not figure in Grice's (1975, 1978) theory of conversational implicature. It is, however, partly covered by Brown and Levinson's (1978/1987) principle of politeness, which is presented by them as an addition to Grice's list of maxims.

In this experiment, Verplanck (1955) asked his students to select a fellow student or other suitable individual "who was not informed in any way that he was taking part in an experiment," and engage that person in normal conversation for a period of half an hour. This thirty-minute period was to be divided into three 10-minute periods: "During the first 10-minute period, once conversation was under way, *E* [the experimenter] did not reinforce any statement made by *S* [the subject]" (p. 668). In other words, the experimenter did not respond to any statement made by the subject with an expression of agreement. I assume, though this is not explicitly stated, that other varieties of utterance were acknowledged by supplying the appropriate continuer. During this first phase of the experiment, the number of expressions of opinion were counted so as to provide a baseline against which to measure the increase in the number of opinions expressed by the subject during the second 10-minute experimental period during which

> *E* agreed with every opinion-statement by saying: "Yes, you're right," "That's so," or the like, or by nodding the head and smiling affirmation if he could not interrupt. . . . In the third 10-minute period, the *E*s attempted to extinguish the opinion statements [in some cases] by withdrawing *all* reinforcement, that is, by failing to respond . . . in any

> way to *S*'s speech, and [in other cases] by disagreeing with each opinion stated. (p. 668)

Verplanck describes the results of this experiment as follows:

> Each of the 24 Ss showed an increase in his relative frequency of opinion during the reinforcement period over . . . his preceding . . . period. . . . Twenty one of the 24 showed a *reduced* [Relative Frequency of opinion] in the extinction or disagreement period below that of the preceding period of reinforcement. (p. 672)

More significant for our present purpose is the comment,

> No *S* ever gave any evidence that he was "aware" that he was serving as a subject in an experiment, that his behavior was being deliberately manipulated and recorded, or that there was anything peculiar about the conversation. The only qualification that must be made is this: during extinction some Ss got angry at E and commented on his disagreeableness, or noted his "lack of interest." (p. 671)

VI. THE ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Much more common than the ethnomethodological experiment in vivo is the *ethnomethodological thought experiment*. In this procedure, the investigator imagines or, more commonly, asks an audience to imagine the situation in which some putative norm or convention is contravened and considers or asks the audience to consider how he or she in the capacity of a member of the social group in question, would react to such behavior or how others might be expected to do so.

For an example of this kind of ethnomethodological thought experiment, I quote from a recent book by Dorothy Smith (1987). She writes,

> When I take my dog for a walk in the morning, I observe a number of what we might call "conventions". I myself walk on the sidewalk; I do not walk on the neighbor's lawns. My dog, however, freely runs over the lawns. *My dog also, if I am not careful, may shit on a neighbor's lawn, and there are certainly some neighbors who do not like this.* (pp. 154-55, my emphasis)

Smith (personal communication) points out that this is not, strictly speaking, an experiment in that both she and many of her readers have had personal experience of the actual reactions of neighbors in such a case. I would argue, nevertheless, that this case differs from the

ethnomethodological thought experiment, properly so-called, only in being restricted to evidence of what *actually* happens when a putative convention is contravened. The thought experiment proper has the advantage (that, as University of Calgary Professor C. B. Martin [personal communication] points out, is much more significant from the standpoint of the philosopher than it is from that of the sociologist) of allowing the investigator to explore the way that linguistic conventions extend or may, with consistency, be extended beyond the actual to the hypothetical case. It is this rather than the opprobrium that the perpetrator of an ethnomethodological experiment in vivo is liable to incur that accounts for and partly justifies the philosopher's preference for the thought experiment.

Needless to say, it is in the form of the thought experiment that the ethnomethodological experiment appears in the writings of the philosophers of ordinary language. In this case, the object of the exercise is to throw light on the conventions governing the way in which words are put together to form intelligible sentences by flouting the supposed convention and inviting one's reader to share the consternation that this produces in any competent speaker or interpreter of the language in question. Two examples of the use of the ethnomethodological thought experiment by philosophers for the purpose of the conceptual analysis of ordinary language must suffice. The first comes from Ryle's (1949) *The Concept of Mind*: "It would be absurd to speak of someone having a sensation, or a feeling, on purpose; or to ask someone what he had a twinge *for*" (pp. 105-6). The second example comes from Austin's (1970) essay "The Meaning of a Word":

> Suppose that I ask "What is the point of doing so and so?" For example, I ask Old Father William "What is the point of standing on one's head?" he replies in the way we know. Then I follow this up with "What is the point of balancing an eel on the end of one's nose?" And he explains. Now suppose that I ask my third question "What is the point of doing *anything*—not anything *in particular*, but just *anything?*" Old Father William would no doubt kick me downstairs without the option. (p. 59)

It does not take much to see that in taking this action Old Father William is standing in for the linguistic community in general.

VII. DISTINGUISHING VARIETIES OF CONSTERNATION

Professor J.J.C. Smart of Australian National University (personal communication) raises an interesting objection to this use of conster-

nation on the part of the listener as evidence that a linguistic convention has been transgressed. He points out that there are utterances that provoke consternation because of a purely empirical improbability of the information they purport to convey rather than any semantic impropriety in the way the sentence is put together. Smart's example is the statement *I just saw a five-legged dog.*

It is true that such a statement would cause as much if not more consternation than the examples cited by Ryle and Austin. Nevertheless, comparing the different cases suggests a difference in the kind of consternation involved. It would be natural to describe the consternation provoked by *I just saw a five-legged dog* as "incredulity" or "disbelief," whereas the consternation provoked by Ryle's *What did you have that twinge for?* and Austin's *What is the point of doing anything —not anything in particular, but just anything?* would be naturally described as "bafflement," "perplexity," or "incomprehension."

However, to sharpen this distinction, we need to do the kind of thing that professional philosophers by virtue of their training are very reluctant to do—namely, to switch from using ethnomethodological thought experiments to using ethnomethodological experiments in vivo—when they try to elucidate the conventions of linguistic usage. The reluctance of philosophers to do this does not stem from the kind of considerations that have deterred sociologists from exploiting the in vivo experiment. For the objections that can be raised against the use of in vivo experiments designed to elucidate the kinds of social convention of interest to the sociologist do not apply in the same way to their use as a way of elucidating the linguistic conventions that are of interest to philosophers. Flouting a convention that governs a socially significant aspect of human conduct can cause serious social disruption and provoke anger and hostility against the perpetrator/experimenter. This does not apply in the same way to the case of in vivo experiments designed to elucidate the linguistic conventions that are of interest to the philosopher. No doubt, if a conceptual analyst were to make a practice of conducting in vivo experiments in ordinary social contexts, doubts might be raised about the experimenter's sanity, but a more serious consequence than that is hard to imagine.

Not only would it be possible to conduct in vivo experiments in which deviant sentences are inserted into appropriate slots in ordinary conversation and the reactions of the listener recorded, it would also be possible to conduct experiments that are a kind of halfway house between the pure in vivo experiment and the pure thought

experiment. In this case, the experimenter interviews the subject and asks him or her how he or she would react if the experimenter were to utter the deviant sentence in an appropriate context in the course of ordinary conversation. By using either or both these methods, it should be possible to differentiate clearly between the patterns of listener reaction typical of the incredulity provoked by utterances like *I just saw a five-legged dog* and those typical of the incomprehension provoked by Ryle's *What did you have that twinge for?* or Austin's *What is the point of doing anything—not anything in particular, but just anything?*

VIII. CONCLUSION[2]

If this account of the character and methodological affinities of conceptual analysis is correct, what consequences, if any, does it have for our view of interdisciplinary boundaries in this area? My own view, for what it is worth, is that simply because ethnomethodology and conceptual analysis use the same methodology to investigate social norms and conventions we cannot say that they form a single discipline or that conceptual analysis is a branch of ethnomethodology concerned with the social conventions governing language. For while ethnomethodologists, qua sociologists, are interested in *all* kinds of social convention as phenomena in their own right, conceptual analysts, qua philosophers, are interested in *some* linguistic conventions for the sake of the light they throw on such traditional philosophical issues as the nature of linguistic communication, the character of moral and aesthetic judgments, the nature of truth and the manner of its determination (epistemology), and the kind of universe that is presupposed by those conventions and the process of linguistic communication that they make possible (metaphysics). However, since conceptual analysis is arguably the only methodological procedure other than the representation of the structure of arguments in the symbolism of formal logic that is available to the philosopher, the thesis that conceptual analysis is an empirical investigation of linguistic convention is in line with Quine's (1969) contention in "Epistemology Naturalized" that the issues of epistemology and, I would add, of philosophy in general arise within the body of science rather than from some Olympian position outside it. But whereas, for Quine, epistemology is an offshoot of the psychophysiology of sensation, on

this analysis, philosophy in general, including epistemology, appears as an offshoot of empirical sociolinguistics.

NOTES

1. For a defense of this view of analyticity, see Place (1991).
2. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the topic addressed in this concluding section of the essay.

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Ullin T. Place studied philosophy, psychology and social anthropology at Oxford in the 1940s, taught psychology in Australia in the 1950s, was a clinical psychologist in the British National Health Service in the 1960s, taught philosophy at Leeds in the 1970s, retired in 1982 and is currently an honorary lecturer in philosophy at Leeds and in psychology at the University of Wales, Bangor. His best-known publication, "Is Consciousness a Brain Process?" (1956) launched the Australian version of the "mind-brain identity theory." His current research interest is in tying together associative learning theory, behavior analysis, conceptual analysis, connectionism, conversation analysis, and an approach to metaphysics that combines a conceptualist theory of universals, an intentionalist theory of reference, the picture theory of meaning, and the counterfactual theory of causal necessity.