[Footnote and three references added, July 1993]

Conceptual Analysis 1 - Introduction to the conceptual analysis of ordinary language

Conceptual analysis

The object in the first section of the course which is now complete was to discuss certain fundamental epistemological and metaphysical issues about how we come to know what the universe contains, about what it is for something to exist, what different kinds of things can be said to exist and what sort of explanations can be given of why some things exist while others do not and why those things that do exist have the characteristics that they do have. The main reason for concentrating attention on our knowledge of what exists, on the nature of existence and on the methods of appropriate its explanation is because as psychologists we are concerned with determining and explaining what exists, occurs and is as a matter of fact the case within a particular region or domain within the totality of facts or, as I now [July 1993] prefer to say following Barwise and Perry (1983), the totality of 'situations' which constitute the universe. However for the purposes of ordinary psychological research, it would probably be unnecessary to go as deeply as this into the fundamental logical and philosophical issues behind empirical research in general. But since our concern in the remainder of these lectures will be with a logical and philosophical investigation of the psychological concepts of ordinary language and since the object of this exercise is to throw light on matters of psychological fact, a study of the basic principles governing the relationship between what there is and how we talk about what there is, is an essential preliminary to the main enquiry.

The second essential preliminary to an enquiry into the psychological concepts of ordinary language, is a discussion of the techniques of conceptual analysis employed in this branch of enquiry; and this is the subject of the present section.

The aims of conceptual analysis

As we saw in the second lecture a concept in the sense in which the word is used in the context of conceptual analysis is a linguistic entity which is related to the verb and noun phrases which go to make up a sentence in the way propositions are related to the indicative sentences that are said to 'express' them. It follows from this that conceptual analysis may be viewed as a branch of linguistics or more specifically as a form of applied semantics, which aims at characterizing, defining or otherwise specifying the linguistic rules governing the relationship between the words and expressions of a language, and the kinds of things in the world to which they are and can be used to refer. As applied to the psychological concepts of ordinary language, conceptual analysis aims to provide information about the ontological commitments and cosmological or explanatory function of this particular conceptual system. In other words conceptual analysis, when used in this way aims to throw light on what there actually is in the universe, not by discovering new and previously unsuspected features of it, but by examining the kinds of thing to whose existence we are and are not committed by the conventions governing the way we talk in ordinary non-technical contexts. The assumption is made that the language which we employ in everyday life is unlikely to contain concepts which define empty classes and which cannot, therefore, be used to refer to anything that actually exists or occurs. Given this assumption we can reasonably expect to derive information about what the universe contains from a purely linguistic investigation. We cannot, of course, expect to discover any new and previously unexpected features of the world in this way, as we can from an empirical investigation of the facts and phenomena themselves. There is a sense in which conceptual analysis can never tell us more than what we know already, in so far we already know how to use the concepts in question. But what it can do, is to enable us to examine very much more closely the implications of what we already know, to present it in a more orderly and systematic way and to avoid making illegitimate extrapolations and inferences from it.

Conceptual analysis as an empirical enquiry - objections

One of the consequences which follow from the view of conceptual analysis as investigation of language, is that it becomes possible and, indeed, necessary to view it as an empirical enquiry into matters of contingent fact about the way people speak and write. This suggestion is often resisted by the philosophers who have developed and practised this technique, mainly, I suspect, because they are afraid that, if they were to recognize and publicize this fact, they might be compelled to leave the comfort of their armchair and soil their hands in the muddy waters of empirical fact-gathering.   Three objections are usually put forward to the suggestion that conceptual analysis is an empirical enquiry. Firstly it is argued that what the conceptual analyst is concerned with is the logical aspects of language, and that logic is concerned not with what people actually say, how they actually argue, or what they actually infer, but with what they *ought* to say, how they *ought* to argue, and what they *ought* to infer. Consequently, and this is the second objection, statistical studies of what people actually say, argue and infer have no relevance to the purposes with which the conceptual analyst is concerned. Thirdly, it is argued, it is misleading to talk about conceptual analysis as an empirical investigation of language, because this would suggest that a conceptual analysis is concerned only with what is true of a particular natural language such as English, French, German, Dutch or Chinese; whereas conceptual analysis is concerned with linguistic facts which transcend the differences between different natural languages.

Reply to objections

In reply to these objections, it must be conceded at the outset that there is an important sense in which conceptual analysis is concerned with what is true as a matter of logical necessity rather than with matters of empirical and contingent fact. But the kind of necessary and analytical truth which depends, not so much on the basic laws and principles of logic without which no meaningful proposition can be uttered and no valid inference drawn, as on the particular rules and conventions governing the use of particular words, expressions and sentences in a given natural language; and, although such propositions are true necessarily and analytically, the fact that the rules governing the use of the words and expressions they contain

are such that the proposition is true, necessarily and analytically, is itself a contingent and empirical fact about the natural language in terms of which the proposition is formulated.

> "It is true that the native English speaker requires no empirical evidence to tell him that if something is red all over, it cannot be green all over. The fact that something cannot be both red and green all over at the same time is not an empirical fact; it is a logically necessary truth. It is nevertheless an empirical fact about the English language that the words 'red' and 'green' are used in such a way that the sentence 'something cannot be red and green all over' expresses a logically necessary truth, and in such a way that a native speaker is justified in inferring 'x is not green' from a statement 'x is red all over'" (Place, 1966, p. 144).

The case for regarding conceptual analysis as an empirical enquiry rests on the fact that the conceptual analyst is concerned, not with formulating and asserting logically necessary truths, but with a metalinguistic enquiry into the linguistic rules and conventions which bring it about that certain sentences in the language express logically necessary truths while others do not.

Does this mean that conceptual analysis ought to be conducted on the basis of empirical and statistical studies of what native speakers of a particular language actually say? In my view we cannot dismiss such studies as wholly irrelevant to the problems of conceptual analysis. Nevertheless it is important to recognize that conceptual analysis is concerned not so much with what people actually say as with the rules and conventions that govern and regulate what they say. Now it is a characteristic of social rules and conventions of which linguistic rules and conventions are a subspecies, that they are frequently broken in actual practice. Consequently the rules or conventions governing a particular type of behaviour can never be inferred with certainty simply from a knowledge of what people actually do. Nevertheless, in so far as a rule is effective, it must affect the way people actually behave in statistical terms, so that the hypothesis that a particular rule or convention operates within a given community would be disconfirmed if no such effect were discoverable in an empirical and statistical study of the relevant behaviour. However, when a social anthropologist, for example, tries to investigate the rules and conventions governing the social behaviour within a previously unknown pre-literate community, he does not begin by making a statistical inventory of the occurrence of different types of behaviour. He relies in the first instance on what an informant who has

grown up with and knows the society from the inside tells him about the rules which operate. In some cases, the rules are explicitly formulated and taught to the members of the community in this way. In other cases, as in the case of most linguistic rules, the rules are not explicitly and are picked up by the community members during the process of socialization. Where the rules are explicitly formulated the anthropologist's only problem is to persuade his informant to divulge what is often regarded as secret knowledge available only to someone who has been properly initiated into the society. In the case of the unformulated and unstated rules, the anthropologist relies, not so much on his own observation of what actually goes on, although these observations will obviously help to confirm or falsify the hypotheses that he formulates about the nature rules that are operating, as on the answers he receives from his informant about what would be the correct procedure in various hypothetical circumstances which are put to him. The informant is able to answer these hypothetical questions by virtue of his implicit knowledge of the rules, based on past experience of what has been done on many similar occasions in the past.

The procedure adopted in conceptual analysis is very similar to the procedure adopted by the social anthropologist in the case of implicit, unstated social conventions, except that in this case the conceptual analyst combines the roles of investigator and informant in his own person which as a native speaker of the language whose rules are being studied he is fully qualified to do. In other words, he formulates and checks hypotheses as to the implicit rules governing linguistic behaviour within his own linguistic community, by considering what he would and would not find it natural to say in a variety of hypothetical contingencies. The conclusions that he reaches must, of course, be checked against the linguistic intuitions of other native speakers; and this check is normally provided by the interchange of philosophical debate. The only serious methodological objection to this procedure is that there is a danger that the conclusions reached may sometimes reflect the linguistic habits of a narrow social class, the academic community, or even the peculiar linguistic habits of philosophers as a sub-group of the academic community, rather than those of the wider community of native speakers of the natural language in question. It is mainly, I suggest, in providing a

counterbalance against this kind of parochialism that the introduction of some more broadly based statistical study of linguistic usage could have a salutary influence.[1]

In reply to the objection that linguistic features peculiar to a particular natural language such as English, are of no interest from the standpoint of conceptual analysis as practised by philosophers, it need only be said that this is a matter of what the philosopher is interested in getting out of the technique rather than a matter of what the technique itself provides information about. Conceptual analysis when conducted in English on the words and expressions belonging to the language can only provide information about the concepts to be found in that particular natural language. Moreover, as anyone knows who has ever translated from one natural language into another, every language has concepts which have no exact counterparts in the other language and which can never be rendered wholly satisfactorily in translation. At the same time the very possibility, of making any kind of translation from one natural language into another presupposes an extensive, conceptual core, analogous to the 'deep structure' of grammatical rules described by Chomsky (1957), which is common to all natural languages. It is perfectly understandable that philosophers should be more interested in the conceptual core or deep structure that is common to all natural languages rather than in those conceptual features which are peculiar to a single natural language. But they cannot ensure that the technique of conceptual analysis will yield information that can be generalized across natural languages in this way, unless they are prepared either to conduct parallel investigations in other natural languages or to persuade native speakers of those languages to do so for them.

Since our present purpose in using the technique of conceptual analysis to discover the kinds of entities whose existence or occurrence in the world is presupposed by the psychological language of common sense, and since it is *prima facie* most unlikely that the existential presuppositions of the psychological language of common sense will differ from one natural language to another, it is clear that our concern will be with conceptual features that are common to all natural languages in so far as they contain a body of psychological concepts, rather than with the conceptual peculiarities of English. It will therefore be of some importance to ensure that conclusions based on a conceptual analysis of psychological concepts

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[1] [Added 1993] A more cogent reply to the objection that statistical frequency studies are irrelevant as far as conceptual analysis is concerned, based on the suggestion that the right way [to] investigate social norms of which linguistic rules or conventions are a species is to use Garfinkel's (1964) "ethnomethodological experiment," is presented in Place (1992).

conducted in English can be corroborated by a similar analysis carried out in the native language of those who read or hear these words.

References

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