

Defending Analytic Philosophy – Members' Day 2011

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Thesis

Analytic philosophy is the route to wisdom - provided it focuses on propositions, not on sentences.

Attacks on philosophy

1. The advance of science has made it **redundant**
2. It is so abstract that it is **meaningless**
3. It is so ambitious that it is **impossible**
4. It has aspired so much to precision that it has become **trivial**

For some views of philosophy, these attacks may be right

1. If philosophy aspires to **guide science**, it is no longer needed
2. If it aims at lofty wisdom, its extreme **abstraction** puts it beyond clear comprehension
3. If it aims to **solve** our problems (even at the cost of obscurity) it seems to have failed
4. The quest for 'rigour' frequently **cuts it off** from its serious aspirations

What might analytic philosophy be?

1. Necessary and sufficient **conditions** for something to be possible, or actually the case
2. **Reduction** to basics, such as sense impressions, atomic truths, Forms etc.
3. **Definitions** – explaining clearly the nature of each important complex idea
4. Making thought **precise**, by formalising vagueness, ambiguity, domain, modality etc.
5. Fundamental **categorisation** of the actual and possible structure of reality
6. Mapping concept **relations**, as inferences and as grounding, as causal and as a priori
7. Explicating our **language**, as reference, predication, sense, logical form and pragmatics

Assessing these views

1. Full necessary and sufficient conditions is ambitious, but they are very illuminating
2. Getting to one basic seems implausible and rarely persuasive, and all rivals seem possible
3. Definitions are highly worthwhile, as long as they don't have to be dictionary one-liners
4. Precision is now the province of specialists, but is valuable, and worthy of our study
5. Rival candidates for categories all seem equally good, but it is a nice ideal
6. Mapping concept relationships is good, but faces paradox if truth and facts are forgotten
7. No harm in understanding language, but this is potentially a disastrous cul-de-sac

The disastrous cul-de-sac

1. Not just 'ordinary' language, but the ontology of our best scientific language
2. Boggled down in the exact meaning of especially tricky sentences
3. These are problems for logic, which vanish in practical dialogue
4. Vagueness too is a big problem for logic, but a minimal problem in discussion
5. If you start with language, you find yourself trapped in it
6. In discussion we focus on unambiguous, non-vague propositions, not on sentences

My preferred view

1. We want a map of understanding, by analysing 'down', 'up' and 'across'
2. We go 'down' for basics and grounding relations, and 'up' for categories
3. Across, we 'follow the wind of the argument', to see inferential and inclusion patterns
4. Ontological commitment should not be inferred from language, but from people
5. We don't have to believe in one big perfect map for this approach
6. Mapping meets most criticisms, and is a huge achievement and progress in philosophy

7. The synthesis that we all want is found in the 'horizontal' analysis of concept-relations
8. Modern books on epistemology and ethics are greatly superior to Greek texts

What are propositions?

1. Propositions are *what* can be expressed, irrespective of *how* – with irony a nice example
2. 'Russellian' propositions are held to be complex features of the actual world
3. We might include possible propositions if they are sets of possible worlds, as Lewis said
4. Frege treated them ('thoughts') as real platonic abstract objects in a 'third realm'
5. For sceptics like Quine and Ayer they are just sets of equivalent sentences
6. Critics struggle to see how propositions can relate to sentences

Propositions in the mind

1. I regard propositions as pre-linguistic mental events in which we conceive possible facts
2. There must be thoughts apart from language, because animals can have them
3. Introspection shows that we have innumerable non-linguistic thoughts, even when talking
4. Propositions, unlike sentences, are never ambiguous, and are rarely vague
5. Indexical words like 'I' and 'now' are a puzzle in language, but simple in thought
6. If someone utters a belief, we can narrow down the exact proposition before discussing it
7. We may grope our way to one proposition by means of many sentences

Objections to analysis of propositions

1. Maybe we should just employ concepts (Nietzsche), or focus on creating them (Deleuze)
2. Maybe propositions are atomic unities (Hegel), but they seem analysable to me
3. Maybe analysis is for losers, and true philosophy is about synthesis
4. Analytic philosophers may avoid what resists analyse – but that might be the important stuff

The rewards of proposition analysis

1. Language traps us not just in large language communities, but in narrow local registers
2. Charity suggests cross-cultural propositions are similar, despite diverse languages
3. Formal logic has to be concerned with the logical form of difficult sentences
4. But reasoning about propositions is clear-cut, and approaches a Kantian 'space of reasons'
5. Propositions and thought lead us much closer to reality than human language does
6. Words in sentences have an order and an emphasis that may not be in the proposition
7. Philosophy is about people, their real beliefs, and their living understanding

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