

**Colin McGinn**

*Truth By Analysis: Games, Names, and Philosophy.*

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The thesis of this book is that “philosophy is the a priori search for essences undertaken in a spirit of play” (3). By “essence” McGinn means what Aristotle did: it is the indispensable quality or intrinsic nature of a thing which makes it the kind of thing it is; it’s what being a certain kind of thing *consists in*. The essences discovered by philosophy are *de re* essences: they concern the nature of things, not concepts, ideas, or words. McGinn insists that the objects of conceptual analysis are not Fregean senses (62) or “Platonic abstractions” (70). Despite being concerned with the essences of things, not the way we think or talk about things, McGinn maintains that essences are discovered by the a priori method of conceptual analysis: essences are revealed by analyzing (decomposing) complex concepts into necessary and sufficient conditions. The essence of things is the object of philosophical investigation and a priori conceptual analysis is the method. The last part of the thesis—that the investigation is undertaken in a spirit of play—means, primarily, that philosophizing is intrinsically valuable, worthwhile for its own sake. Philosophy and playing games are the only activities that would be pursued in Utopia, the situation where all desires are satisfied without effort and where consequently no task would be undertaken as a means to a desired end.

Much of the book is devoted to responding to objections to this thesis. An obvious one is based on Wittgenstein’s discussion of the concept game. Since there is no necessary condition that all games share, it follows that the concept game cannot be successfully analyzed. Rather, the concept game, like most concepts, is a “family resemblance” concept: instead of there being one characteristic that all games share, there is a network of similarities that link the activities we call “games” together. McGinn believes that Bernard Suits has shown in *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Broadview Press, 2005; first published by Toronto University Press in 1977) that Wittgenstein is wrong and that “game” can be defined. Suits provides a summary statement of his definition on page 55 of his book: “playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.” McGinn notes that while he was initially resistant, he eventually became convinced that there are no significant counterexamples to the definition, and that Suits had indeed overturned a doctrine that was for decades an article of faith of analytic philosophy. For McGinn, this demonstrates the power of conceptual analysis; Suits is the inspiration and guiding spirit of the book.

Another objection challenges the analyst’s assumption that all (complex) concepts have non-circular sufficient conditions. One conclusion to draw from fifty years of Gettier counterexamples is that there is no adequate analysis of knowledge. For McGinn this conclusion is too hasty. For one thing, as Suits shows with the concept game, persistence is sometimes rewarded; and McGinn thinks an analysis of knowledge as “non-fluky true belief” shows promise. More generally, he thinks such problems reveal only the limitations of philosophers’ creativity and ingenuity, not anything intrinsically wrong with the method of conceptual analysis. He goes on to argue for the claim that if a concept has a non-trivial

necessary condition, then it has a non-trivial sufficient condition. (He says the denial of this is “incoherent.”) McGinn’s claim here seems to have the unintended result that there are no simple concepts. McGinn’s list (39) of “arguably” simple or primitive concepts includes the concept “red.” Now it would seem that a necessary condition of something being red is that it is closer to pink than it is to blue (to use McGinn’s own example, 97), and thus by his claim that red has a non-circular and non-trivial sufficient condition, i.e., it is analyzable, i.e., it is complex. In his discussion of “red is closer to pink than it is to blue” McGinn says that it is analytic but not in the “Kantian ‘containment’ (dismantling) sense.” But whatever this extended sense of analytic comes to, it seems undeniable that it is a necessary condition of red that it is closer to pink than it is to blue, and that thus, at least according to McGinn’s claim, it has an analysis. But if the concept red is not simple, what concepts are?

The paradox of analysis is dispatched in short order. This problem, which goes back to Plato’s *Meno*, can be stated as dilemma: in order for an analysis to be informative, one must be ignorant of the correct analysis, but in order to recognize a proposed analysis as correct, one cannot be ignorant of the correct analysis; thus, any analysis is either uninformative or cannot be recognized as correct. McGinn’s solution is based on the distinction between implicit (practical) knowledge and explicit (theoretical) knowledge: before the analysis we have the former kind of knowledge and afterwards the latter.

McGinn endorses Kant’s conception of analyticity and defends it against Quine’s objection. This is important for McGinn because he views the results of conceptual analyses as analytic truths. The use to which he puts analyticity is, however, quite un-Kantian, and Kant would question his claim that analytic truths yield knowledge of reality. Kant introduced the analytic/synthetic distinction so that the question how a proposition is known could be sharply distinguished from the question of what makes the proposition true. Kant’s view is that while analytic propositions are true in virtue of conceptual connections, synthetic propositions are true in virtue of the way the world is. Kant thus denies that a priori knowledge of analytic propositions yields knowledge of reality; for him, knowledge of reality must be synthetic. Kant says he had to incite a (Copernican) revolution in philosophy—rather than the mind conforming to reality, the objects of (phenomenal) reality must conform to the mind—in order to account for a priori synthetic knowledge of the necessary features of reality. (Transcendental idealism thus provides an excellent example of the lengths to which philosophers will go to give an account of a priori knowledge of reality.)

The conception of philosophy presented in this book may strike some as excessively narrow. Is conceptual analysis really the *whole* of philosophy? McGinn’s response is to broaden the notion of analysis so that it includes activities beyond decomposition such as “category analysis” (classifying things into general categories, e.g., mental or physical, objective or subjective), “compatibility analysis” (determining whether two things (e.g., free will and determinism) are compatible), “connective analysis” (understanding the connections among concepts), “contrastive analysis” (elucidating a concept by saying what it is not), and, finally, “reductive analysis” (reducing one type of thing to another, sometimes for reasons of simplicity). McGinn then notes that in line with this broadened conception of conceptual analysis, it turns out that even continental philosophers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre were practitioners of conceptual analysis. If Heidegger is a conceptual analyst, then McGinn’s

conception of philosophy may avoid the charge of narrowness, but the claim that the essence of philosophy is conceptual analysis loses some of its punch.

The direct reference theory of names poses a serious problem for McGinn's view. According to this theory, names are semantic primitives whose role in language is to denote objects without the assistance of an associated descriptive content. And generalizing the theory to predicates would undermine the idea that conceptual analysis is a source of a priori knowledge of the essences of things. Kripke holds that natural kinds like gold have essences which involve their underlying atomic structure, not the descriptive content (yellow malleable metal) associated with the natural kind term. Thus for Kripke, essences are discovered empirically and not via a priori conceptual analysis. McGinn's response is to develop a sophisticated version of the description theory which accommodates the insights of the direct reference theory while preserving a role for conceptual analysis.

The book concludes with two chapters devoted to metaphysics. In the first McGinn is pessimistic about the possibility of ontology: the attempt to say whether reality is ultimately physical, mental, or abstract. And he concludes the project is doomed due to the lack of coherence of these ontological categories. We must, he says, "curb our ontological enthusiasm" because "It simply makes no *sense* to ask if reality is fundamentally physical or fundamentally mental or fundamentally abstract" (165). But in the next chapter he argues that the essence of the world (any world) is the instantiation of the general (the abstract?) by the particular. He thus appears to end up defending an ambitious metaphysical thesis (involving some version of Platonism) which seems to be in tension with his earlier recommendation to curb our ontological enthusiasm.

Virtually everyone agrees that conceptual analysis yields a priori knowledge, but knowledge about *what*? Many philosophers in the analytic tradition have answered that it is knowledge of a conceptual scheme. On McGinn's more ambitious view, it is knowledge of objective reality, the world of reference. But how can examining the disassembled pieces of a concept tell us about the *de re* essences of things? McGinn suggests that "concepts latch onto these objective essences" (67) and that "objective essences are 'uploaded' in our concepts" (125). I suspect that both critics and supporters of McGinn would like a fuller and more developed account of the process by which concepts get loaded with *de re* essences.

McGinn's thesis is big, bold, and controversial. Even those who are dubious will find a lot to admire in his clearly written and vigorously argued book.

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