

Herman Cappelen

Philosophy without Intuitions.

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Colin McGinn

Truth by Analysis. Games, Names, and Philosophy.

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Both books under review concern themselves with metaphilosophy and proceed from an analytic philosophy background. Nonetheless, they disagree widely not only about the way philosophy is and has been actually practised, but also in their proposals regarding what philosophy should be like. Each author claims that he himself follows and endorses the best of philosophical traditions. Cappelen sees this in a variety of methods which cannot by some principled qualities (like being *a priori* or resulting in analytic sentences) be set apart from the sciences. McGinn, by contrast, sees the distinctive character of philosophy in the method of conceptual analysis. They agree when it comes to identifying some of their adversaries. Both reject Experimental Philosophy and Ordinary Language Philosophy, which might be surprising given McGinn's endorsement of conceptual analysis and Cappelen's endorsement of empirical methods. One reason for these rejections is their shared conviction that philosophy deals with the world and its (types of) entities, not with psychology (i.e., merely the human mind and its apprehension of the world) or language (or, to be precise, the way the world is represented in language).

Cappelen's main concern is to refute the 'Centrality Thesis', which claims that contemporary analytic philosophers rely on intuitions as evidence for philosophical theories. The crucial term in this thesis is, of course, "intuition". Cappelen's whole argument depends on the manner "intuition" is defined. He separates his refutation of the Centrality Thesis into two parts: (i) the claim that on those occasions when philosophers do engage in intuition talk, the reference to intuitions can be substituted by a reference to folk theories, prejudices, or common knowledge, (ii) the claim that in those supposedly paradigmatic examples of philosophy centring on 'intuitions' (mostly when philosophers invoke thought experiments), intuition in the crucial sense of the Centrality Thesis plays no role. Both claims are empirical, since they depend on a comprehensive or at least representative survey of 'contemporary analytic philosophy' (given a suitable definition of, at least, "belonging to the analytic tradition" and "contemporary"). Such a survey might require a research project of its own. Thus it is hard to tell whether Cappelen's claims are empirically adequate. With respect to the sought-for uses of "intuition", at least, we have to remember what the logician says: absence of evidence is not evidence of absence!

Let us suppose, however, that Cappelen's claim (i) has been established. What does this show? It shows that describing the philosopher's data or sources does not require casting these as "intuitions". It does not show that philosophy does not, as Cappelen likes to argue, rely on a special point of departure of its investigations. An Ordinary Language Philosopher may reply to

Cappelen: Ordinary Language Philosophy does not rest its claims on intuitions. “Intuition” has too many different meanings: these range from opinions based on ‘common sense’ or folk theories (so that claiming something to be ‘intuitively’ so may hedge the claim made, as Cappelen points out) to the intellectual apprehension of conceptual insight (e.g., in some philosophies of mathematics). One might call reliance on one’s unsystematic (i.e., pretheoretical) understanding of language rules ‘intuitive’, but as the term has been used for quite different forms of belief, it may be better to speak of *an expression of language competence* or *linguistic judgement* or *meta-linguistic beliefs*. In Ordinary Language Philosophy we investigate possible cases under the directive of what we would say if we were in such and such a situation. The evidence which turns up with regard to this rests either on linguistic judgements or on pre-theoretical knowledge of language. Philosophical ‘intuitions’ either appeal to shared convictions in some (folk) theory, which carries little argumentative weight, or they are guided by a (partial) apprehension of the rules of word usage. Intuitions in this latter sense are philosophically useful and necessary as an element of analysis. In the positive sense, one may surmise that the new fashionable recourse to ‘intuitions’ stems from a dissatisfaction with ‘naturalism’ and the mere stipulation of language forms. Pleas to ‘intuitions’ wish to present something approximating a source of philosophical insight, where this source had better be language.

Cappelen’s second claim depends not only on his examples being chosen representatively, but foremost on his definition of “intuition”. Cappelen defines “intuition” by appealing to three features: (i) intuitions supposedly come with a phenomenality that makes what one intuitively seems true, (ii) intuitive judgments need no justification, they provide justification (i.e., they have ‘rock status’), (iii) they are based on conceptual competence. Cappelen then goes on to show that the eight paradigm cases of contemporary analytic philosophy supposedly relying on intuitions (ranging from Perry’s shopping cart case to Chalmers’ zombies) do not rely on intuitions in the sense defined by Cappelen. Again, let us suppose that he has established this. What does it show? It might very well show that the definition has made unrealistic demands on ‘intuitions’. Most crucial in this respect is feature (ii), heavily relied upon by Cappelen in his analysis of the paradigm cases. In my experience the extensive reference made to ‘intuitions’ in the philosophy of language and epistemology (and especially so in philosophical logic, although Cappelen at one point seemingly wants to exclude that area) does not include the non-revisability of intuitions at all. Often, special emphasis is put on the progress from our initial to our ‘reflected’ intuitions. So it seems as though Cappelen is setting up a straw man here.

Nonetheless, Cappelen’s book, apart from the laudable – even so partial – liberalism with respect to philosophy’s methods, is a valuable advance in metaphilosophy: it challenges all those who use ‘intuition’-talk and rely on ‘intuitions’ in their philosophical methodology to come up with clarifications about what they mean by it, and how they meet Cappelen’s challenge.

McGinn might be understood as taking up that very challenge by boldly stating that philosophy investigates the essence of things in the world, and that it does so by conceptual analysis (i.e., through relying on our conceptual competence). McGinn’s defence of conceptual analysis on first sight might be seen as reminding philosophers of a viable method, set aside because of too much undeserved bad press (on the hands of Quine and many others). McGinn, however, claims that philosophy is nothing but conceptual analysis. Such methodological imperialism has done philosophy no good in its history, and the opposite claim might be more

commendable: philosophy refers to any viable method used anywhere in the sciences and adds some special methods (like formalization and—contrary to Cappelen, Quine, and many others—conceptual analysis). Conceptual analysis cannot be all of philosophy. For a start: that philosophy is conceptual analysis has to be established by conceptual analysis itself. The concept of philosophy will have to entail that philosophy is cannot be anything but conceptual analysis. McGinn does not establish this.

In point of fact, McGinn only puts forth a few conceptual analyses himself. Centre stage he rejects the undefinability of the concept of ‘play’ and sides with and endorses Suits’ analysis of it [the repetition of which here would distract us too long]. He defines ‘knowledge’ as ‘non-fluky true belief’. Although this gets the (in)famous Gettier-cases of the backs of the theory of knowledge, one may doubt whether this goes far enough. Why not define “knowledge” as “true belief”? There is nothing inconsistent about *both* the following sentences: “Peter knew it, but only by accident”, “Peter knew it, but could give no reasons”. In any case one may agree with McGinn that conceptual analysis is viable and useful. How far does he want to carry it? Is there a conceptual analysis of the concepts of ‘stone’ or ‘rose’? Although McGinn mentions in passing Strawson’s idea of ‘connective analysis’, which elucidates the links between concepts, his main idea of analysis seems to be decomposition into necessary and sufficient combinations of constituent concepts (some of which finally have to be atomic). The tradition of conceptual analysis in Ordinary Language Philosophy includes many more methods (ranging from substitution tests over the controversial paradigm case arguments to contrastive analysis and rephrasing by assertability conditions, *inter alia*). McGinn, however, foams about the ‘linguistic turn’. He wants it ‘burned’ and to be ‘stamped out’.

McGinn’s rejection of any analysis of language is one of the shortcomings of his book. This may rest on a confusion about the role of language in linguistic analysis: language need not be taken by linguistic philosophers as the primary *object* of philosophy, while an analysis of language (usage) may still be taken as one crucial or even the privileged *method* of getting at concepts. “Definition” applies to words at least as well as to concepts. Proposing a definition and testing it with cases, similar to proposing a hypothesis and testing it, explores whether the definition covers all cases: it does so by testing our judgements regarding the applicability of a term, the meaning of which contains the concept referring to the property ultimately under investigation. If language were not methodologically essential, one would (i) have to account in some other way for the shared possession of concepts (which, on the other hand, every theory of concepts has to do) and (ii) find some other way to identify a concept in question intersubjectively. Methodologically, language helps to identify a concept in question as the core of the meaning of an expression employed. Further on, many concepts (especially those for social institutions) depend on language and rule-governed communities. Concepts like ‘marriage’ cannot be separated from special speech acts that *constitute* respective social facts. Many, if not most, of the concepts that are of interest to philosophers will be of this kind. Epistemological concepts such as ‘knowledge’ are at least indirectly tied to language (e.g., by the link from feasible assertions to know something to justifying them towards an audience, which of course happens through using language and appealing to shared conventions). Moreover, one may argue that concepts that involve the powers of reflection and self-representation need language (‘inner speech’) as a representational device. This applies to all forms of shared knowledge (‘common knowledge’) essential for conventions, and arguably to a full-fledged

concept of ‘belief’, as this involves reflecting on one’s beliefs, their interrelations, and their relation to the world. So, although conceptual analysis by definition aims at concepts, the privileged method to do so is by means of linguistic analysis. As conceptual analysis aims at concepts shared between individual natural languages, no individual natural language is essential for it, and all its cases of analysis have to be transferable in principle from one language to another.

The other main difficulty I find with McGinn’s book is his claim that philosophy discovers the essence of things (“things” used here generically for all types of entities) by conceptual analysis. Two questions can be raised immediately: (i) what are ‘essences’ and (ii) why can we rely on concepts being properly tied to the essences of things?

The second question can only be answered by a theory of concept acquisition/possession/evolution. We need a theory of why our conceptual equipment hooks up properly with properties in reality. Maybe some form of cognitive evolutionary theory can deliver that much. At points, it seems that McGinn supports a representational theory of concepts (like concepts being types in the ‘language of thought’). Still, evolution may have equipped us in many cases only with conceptual hook-up good enough for reproduction, not fit to capture the essences of things.

What are ‘essences’ anyway? Linguistic analysis answers this question by reducing essential truth to analytic truth, and thus finally to meaning constitutive definitions or conventions. Consider the following three sentences:

- (1) “Cats are mammals” is analytic/necessarily true.
- (2) The concept ‘cat’ contains the concept ‘mammal’.
- (3) Cats are essentially mammals.

We can freely move from (1) to (3), and back, by the *authority of language*: language developed and was adapted in its definitions of words to be applied successfully (i.e., interwoven with non-linguistic practices), the meaning of a word containing crucially a concept expressed, this concept referring to a property in reality. The essence that is thus captured is, first and foremost, a linguistic essence, susceptible of definition, but we are prone to revise or replace our definitions in the light of new important discoveries. It is ‘foremost a linguistic essence’, since the necessity involved is that of the linguistic framework. Many, McGinn included, want to have metaphysical essences (i.e., essences expressed in generalizations stronger than empirical/inductive generalizations, but not dependent on ‘mere linguistic conventions’). Again, there may be feasible theories for such a concept of essences (like two-dimensionalist semantics), but McGinn does not deliver one; his hints link essences to natural kinds, thus hinting at identifying essences with the nature of natural kinds. A non-trivial problem for such a theory will be its compatibility with a theory of concept possession as mentioned in the last paragraph. Concepts as representations in our brain hook-up to reality by *natural* laws; but natural laws can vary while *metaphysical* identities stay constant; thus, conceptual links need not coincide with metaphysical links. McGinn has to work out this part of his theory.

McGinn's book, therefore, on the one hand presents a strong case for the viability of conceptual analysis and thus defends a method philosophy should not forego. On the other hand, McGinn's approach needs a substantially more detailed exposition of its own methodology and metaphysical background.

Although neither Cappelen nor McGinn is likely to find the suggestion much to their taste, one may do best by combining Cappelen's open methodology with a dose of McGinn's conceptual analysis, and thank them both for their attacks on Experimental Philosophy's much too loose methodological reflection.

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