Philosophical Arguments from Ordinary Language

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Language in Philosophy

- What roles does/can the analysis of language play in philosophy?
First-Order Philosophy

- Linguistic analysis can certainly yield conclusions about language and concepts
- First-order philosophy = philosophy outside phil of language & psychology
- Q: Can studying language (help to) settle substantive issues in first-order philosophy?
Examples: Epistemology

- Studying ‘S knows that p’ → conclusions about knowledge (Gettier tradition, contextualists/opponents, ...)
- Studying ‘S knows how to Φ’ → conclusions about knowing how (Stanley and Williamson...)

Examples: Metaphysics

• temporal sentences $\rightarrow$ time (Ludlow)
• modal sentences $\rightarrow$ worlds (Lewis)
• event sentences $\rightarrow$ events (Davidson)
• descriptions $\rightarrow$ ontology (Russell)
• existence claims $\rightarrow$ ontology (Hirsch, Thomasson, Fine)
Examples: Mind

- ‘x looks F to S’ → perception (Chisholm)
- ‘S believes that p’ → belief (Burge, Soames, ...)
- ‘what it is like to Φ’ → consciousness (Lormand, Hellie)
Examples: Action/Meta-Ethics

- ‘S Φ’s intentionally’ → intentional action (Knobe...)
- ‘ought’/‘good’/’right’ → morality (Frege/Geach,...)
Dismissive Reaction

• “I’m not interested in language, I’m interested in the world”.

• Not ‘knowledge’ but knowledge.

• Not ‘action’ but action.

• Studying the word doesn’t tell us about the world?
Propositions Matter

• Opponent: Semantics links sentences to propositions. What matters to philosophy is which propositions are true.
  • $p_1$ is true, $p_2$ is false.

• Once that’s settled, semantics doesn’t matter.

• Before that’s settled, semantics doesn’t help.
Responses

• Response from pro-language proponents
  • *Language is the object:* Philosophy is about language.
  • *Language is the medium:* We speak/think in a language and can’t escape it.
  • *Language is evidence:* E.g. if S is widely accepted, linguistic data that S means p is evidence that p is true.
Disquotational Arguments

- Disquotational argument: Draw a linguistic conclusion, then disquote.
- (1) ‘Knowledge’ refers to X; so
- (2) Knowledge is X.
- A first-order result in the metaphysics of knowledge.
- From language to the world!
Argument Structure

- Semantic premise: ‘X’ is true iff Y
- Disquotational premise: ‘X’ is true iff X
- Conclusion: X iff Y
Example: Knowing How

• Semantic premise: ‘S knows how to \( \Phi \)’ is true iff \( \exists w: S \) knows that \( w \) is a way to \( \Phi \).

• Disquotation premise: ‘S knows how to \( \Phi \)’ is true iff S knows how to \( \Phi \).

• Conclusion: S knows how to \( \Phi \) iff \( \exists w: S \) knows that \( w \) is a way to \( \Phi \).
Supplemented Structure

- Semantic premise: ‘X’ is true iff Y
- Disquotational premise ‘X’ is true iff X
- Truth premise: X
- Conclusion: Y
Example: A-theory

- Semantic premise: ‘a happened yesterday’ is true iff [A-theoretic analysis]
- Disquotational premise: ‘a happened yesterday’ is true iff X happened yesterday.
- Truth premise: a happened yesterday.
- Conclusion: A-theory.
Resisting the Disquotational Move

To resist a disquotational argument, an opponent of the first-order thesis can:

• (1) Deny the semantic premise
• (2) Deny the disquotational premise
• (3) [Deny the truth premise.]
• *(1) Deny the semantic premise
• (2) Deny the disquotational premise
• (3) [Deny the truth premise.]
Denying the Semantic Premise

• Deny the semantic premise: ‘X’ is true iff Y
• Argue for an alternative semantic analysis
Semantics Broadly Construed

• Semantics narrowly construed: semantics under linguists’ data/constraints

• Semantics broadly construed: semantics also under philosophers’ data/constraints
Examples

- E.g. universally accepted inferences (narrow) vs valid inferences (broad)
- Semantics that assumes abstracta (narrow) vs in light of truth about abstracta (broad)
- Semantics in light of science/naturalness (broad) vs. not (narrow)
Which Semantics?

• Opponent: semantics relevant to disquotation is semantics broadly construed.

• Semantics so construed turns on full reasoning about the nature of X

• so can’t transmit warrant to conclusions about nature of X?

• N.B. the data of semantics broadly construed are less theory-neutral.
• (1) Deny the semantic premise
• *(2) Deny the disquotational premise
• (3) [Deny the truth premise.]
Denying the Disquotational Premise

- Deny the disquotational premise: ‘X’ is true iff X
- Context-dependence, ambiguity, ideolects
- Distinguish notions of truth
Context-Dependence

• The semantic premise should be read as ‘X’ is true in context c iff Y. I’m in context d.

• E.g. contextualism: we’re in the high-standard context. So we can’t conclude that we know we have hands.
Idiolects/Ambiguity

- I’m speaking philosopher’s English, semantics applies to folk English
- I’m speaking my English, semantics applies to their English.
- I’m talking about belief\(_1\), analysis is of belief\(_2\).
Distinguishing Notions of Truth

- Semantic theory just yields truth in a model, not truth in a world
- ‘X’ is true in model m iff Y-in-m
- Doesn’t yield ‘X’ is true in w iff Y-in-w unless worlds have corresponding models
- Doesn’t yield ‘X’ is true iff Y unless actuality has a corresponding model.
Examples

• Emonn Bach: ‘Every part of water is water’ is semantically true (true in all models) but false.

• Meta-ontologists: Model-theoretic semantics for existence claims doesn’t yield worldly semantics
• (1) Deny the semantic premise
• (2) Deny the disquotational premise
• *(3) [Deny the truth premise.]
Denying the Truth
Premise

• Deny X, embrace error theory
• E.g. deny that these are ever true
  • ‘a happened yesterday’
  • ‘s knows that p’
Costs/Benefits

• Usually some cost to common-sense.
• Costs reducible by embracing e.g.
  • false literal content, true implicature
  • literally false, metaphorically true
  • false but true in fiction
  • true of related expression
Disquotation: Summary
So Far

- Arguments require semantic premise, disquotation premise, truth premise
- Opponents have many options for resisting.
- Still, most of these arguments (esp. re (1) and (2)) are on broadly semantic turf
  - except warrant transmission, error?
- So semantics → philosophy link left fairly strong
Another Strategy

• Another strategy for opponents of arguments from language: question the conclusion’s relevance

• I.e. accept the conclusion of a disquotational argument, but question its ability to settle the underlying substantive dispute.
What is X?

- Disquotational arguments typically help to settle disputes over “What is X?”.
- But “What is X?” disputes are often broadly verbal disputes:
  - roughly (apparent) first-order disputes that arise from metalinguistic differences or disagreements
James’ Squirrel Case.

- A: The man goes round the squirrel.
- B: The man does not go round the squirrel.
- James: It depends on what you mean by ‘going round’. If north-east-south-west, A is right. If front-left-back-right, B is right. Make the distinction, then no need for farther dispute.
Deferential Squirrel Case

• If a key term (e.g. ‘going round’, ‘concept’) is used with deference to a community, there may be a fact about who’s right.

• Community means n-e-s-w by ‘round’

• So A is right: the man goes round the squirrel.

• But the dispute is still broadly verbal: pointless if trying to understand the world.
Concepts

• A: Concepts are abstract objects.
• B: Concepts are mental representations.
• Is this a substantive dispute?
Method of Elimination

- To determine whether a dispute is (broadly) verbal over term $T$, eliminate use of $T$ and cognates, and see if dispute can still be stated
  - If no: evidence of verbal dispute
  - If yes: evidence of substantive dispute
Verbal Dispute

• Maybe a residual dispute (e.g. “abstract objects play such-and-such role”)

• Or maybe no residual dispute. Then:
  • If we’re interested in language, have an explicitly verbal dispute (over ‘concept’)
  • If not, distinguish concept_{1} and concept_{2}, and move on.
Worry

- Worry: Using linguistic analysis to settle a ‘what is X’ dispute alone (X is X₁) might settle only a broadly verbal dispute.
- More is needed to settle a broadly substantive dispute.
Free Will

• Compatibilist: ‘Free will is the ability to do what you want’

• Incompatibilist: ‘Free will is the ability to ultimately originate one’s actions’.

• Eliminate ‘free will’. Outcomes?
  • No residual dispute (e.g. Smart/Pereboom?)
  • Residual dispute over e.g. ‘Moral responsibility requires X’.
Common Ground

• For dispute over $X$ to be broadly substantive, there (usually) has to be common ground: a mutually accepted premise about the relevance/role of $X$

• E.g. ‘Moral responsibility requires free will’

• ‘Concepts play such-and-such explanatory role’
Knowing How

• A: To know how to Φ is to be able to Φ.

• B: To know how to Φ is to know a proposition.

• Semantics: ‘S knows how to Φ’ is true iff
  ∃w: S knows that w is a way to Φ

• So B is right.
Method of Elimination

• Is the debate between A and B verbal?
• Maybe not: apply method of elimination (eliminate key term, try to state debate).
• A: “ability plays such-and-such role in action”
• B: “knowing propositions plays such-and-such role in action.”
Resolving the Substantial Dispute?

- Does the linguistic analysis resolve the substantial dispute?
- It does if it is a fixed point that knowing how plays such-and-such role.
- In practice this might not be a fixed point.
Fallback Positions

- E.g. on accepting propositional analysis of ‘knowing how’, A might say:
- “OK, knowing how (in the literal sense) doesn’t play such-and-such role. Abilities do. Knowing how to Φ is a relatively incidental state.”
- Some cost: giving up “knowing how plays that role”. But the position is still quite tenable.
Revised Structure

• Semantic premise: ‘X’ refers to Y
• Disquotational premise: ‘X’ refers to X
• Role premise: X plays role R (uncontested ‘R’)
• Conclusion: Y plays role R.
Denying the Relevance Premise

- Moral: The disquotational move only settles substantial issues against the background of a relevance premise that’s common ground.
- Opponents can respond by denying the role premise.
Contextualism

- Contextualism about knowledge:
  - ‘knows that p’ is context sensitive
    - know_{high} in the philosophy room.
    - know_{low} in ordinary life.
Contextualism and Skepticism

• Many: contextualism helps answer the skeptic.

• We don’t know_{\text{high}}, but we know_{\text{low}}, so ordinary knowledge ascriptions are true.

• Q: Does this scratch the skeptical itch?
Ultra-low knowledge

• Say linguistics tells us ‘knowledge’ means
  • true belief (in ordinary contexts)
  • justified true belief (philosophy contexts)
• Then contextualist verdict is not reassuring
  • true belief but not justification.
  • skeptical worries vindicated, not refuted.
Epistemic Value

• Problem: true belief lacks the relevant sort of epistemic value.

• The contextualist verdict removes the skeptical worry only if knowledge \(_{\text{low}}\) has that value.

• But contextualism can’t establish that.
Epistemic Pluralism

- The view recalls pre-contextualist views: we don’t have $R_1$ but we do have $R_2$.

- E.g. no certainty, yes justification.

- Or: no justification, yes truth.

- The skepticism-answering of this view depends wholly on the epistemic value of $R_1$ and $R_2$. 
Does Contextualism Help?

• If we’ve established that we have $R_1$ and $R_2$ is valuable, we don’t need contextualism.
• If we haven’t, does contextualism help?
  • Maybe if it’s a fixed point that what’s attributed in ordinary contexts is the relevant sort of value.
  • This doesn’t seem to be a fixed point, though. Skeptic will reject it.
Intentional Action

• X-Phi: Whether people judge “X Φ’d intentionally” depends on Φ’s moral valence.

• First-order: Whether X Φ’d intentionally depends on Φ’s moral valence.

• Intermediate step: endorse and disquote!
Opponent's Fallback

- Opponent (previous): intentional action isn’t sensitive to valence.
- Opponent (now): intentional action doesn’t matter for responsibility, schmintentional action does, and it isn’t sensitive to valence.
- Denies common ground: intentional action is what matters for responsibility.
Denials of Role Premise

• Denials of role premise look like:

  • [Strictly speaking] X doesn’t play R.

  • Free will doesn’t play the responsibility role.

  • Knowing how doesn’t play the action-guiding role.

  • Knowledge doesn’t play the value role.
Costs of Denial

• How costly is denying the role premise?
  • One has to deny that certain commonsense claims are literally true.
  • As with truth premise, one can hold that they convey truths, are nonliterally true, that nearby claims are true...
Opponent Replies

• (1) Semantics: ‘X’ refers to X₁
• (2) Disquotation: ‘X’ refers to X.
• (3) First-order: X₂ plays R.
• So (4) Role: X doesn’t play R.

• The semantic premise and first-order reasoning are joint defeaters for the role claim.
Hard Question

• What are the relative weights of semantics, role, nonsemantic reasoning?

• Can semantics and role trump nonsemantic reasoning \((X_2 \text{ plays } R)\)? Break ties? Big weight or small weight?

• Or does nonsemantic reasoning about roles always trump either semantic or role premise?
Assessing the Evidence

• Plausibly linguistic evidence provides some evidence about roles

• That ‘X’ means $X_1$ and that ‘X plays R’ is widely accepted is some evidence that $X_1$ plays R.

• My tentative view: this is weakish evidence, trumpable by first-order counterevidence. Maybe strong enough to break ties?
Wishy-Washy
Conclusion I

- It’s easy to overplay the decisiveness of linguistic arguments. One can resist by
  - resisting semantic premise (broad)
  - resisting disquotational premise
  - resisting role premise
Wishy-Washy Conclusion II

- On the other hand, it’s easy to underplay the relevance.

- Linguistic evidence is one sort of evidence about substantive first-order role claims, to be weighed against other evidence.

- One needs to be very explicit about the bridging premises.
Residual Question

• Hard residual epistemological question: how to weigh the linguistic evidence against other evidence.

• Under what conditions does first-order reasoning for an opposing conclusion defeat (1) the semantic premise, (2) the disquotation premise, (3) the role premise?