

# 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  $\Phi$ ' → conclusions about knowing how (Stanley and Williamson...)

# Examples: Metaphysics

- temporal sentences → time (Ludlow)
- modal sentences → worlds (Lewis)
- event sentences → events (Davidson)
- descriptions → ontology (Russell)
- existence claims → 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  $\Phi$ ' → consciousness (Lormand, Hellie)

# Examples: Action/Meta-Ethics

- 'S  $\Phi$ 's intentionally'  $\rightarrow$  intentional action (Knope...)
- 'ought'/'good'/'right'  $\rightarrow$  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<sub>1</sub>, analysis is of belief<sub>2</sub>.

# 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<sub>1</sub> and concept<sub>2</sub>, and move on.

# Worry

- Worry: Using linguistic analysis to settle a 'what is  $X$ ' dispute alone ( $X$  is  $X_1$ ) 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  $\Phi$  is to be able to  $\Phi$ .
- B: To know how to  $\Phi$  is to know a proposition.
- Semantics: 'S knows how to  $\Phi$ ' is true iff  $\exists w: S$  knows that  $w$  is a way to  $\Phi$
- 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  $\Phi$  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<sub>high</sub> in the philosophy room.
    - know<sub>low</sub> in ordinary life.



# Contextualism and Skepticism

- Many: contextualism helps answer the skeptic.
- We don't know<sub>high</sub>, but we know<sub>low</sub>, 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<sub>low</sub> 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  $\Phi$ ’d intentionally’ depends on  $\Phi$ ’s moral valence
- First-order: Whether X  $\Phi$ ’d intentionally depends on  $\Phi$ ’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  $X_1$
- (2) Disquotation: 'X' refers to X.
- (3) First-order:  $X_2$  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 ( $X_2$  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?