

Against Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract: In this paper, I examine Frank Jackson's (1998) defense of conceptual analysis and flag some of the problems with his defense. If I am right about my criticisms, then, firstly, we do not desperately need conceptual analysis because neither our science nor metaphysics need to be committed to completeness and entailment. This was shown by methodological physicalism. Secondly, conceptual analysis does not give us the expected results. If we expect the conceptual analysis to give us apriori results (in the sense of counterfactual intensions) we are mistaken. There is no fundamental reason to assume that any of our ordinary and natural language concepts are a good way to start to dig for real apriori results. It is equally possible that these results are not discoverable by the human mind. Thirdly, if we can give up apriori results with empirical discovery, then Lycan (1988) is right that we can give up large chunks of our folk concept of free will and still be realist about free will. There is no need to define free will in a way that is near enough to or a natural extension of the folk concept of free will to be a realist about free will.

1. Introduction

In his well-known work *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis* (1998), Frank Jackson proposes an account of conceptual analysis and apriori knowledge and tries to defend it in the face of some criticisms. Especially, he claims that his account can accommodate

Quine's criticism of the analytical-synthetic distinction and its implication for a priori truths, that is, it can agree in practice with the main point of Quine's criticism and still theoretically preserve conceptual analysis and resort to a priori results as a useful method in philosophical reasoning (Jackson 1998, 53-54). In this paper, I argue that Jackson's defense of conceptual analysis relies on some problematic assumptions. By criticizing this account of conceptual analysis, I do not mean to argue against conceptual analysis in all its forms and functions. Conceptual analysis as a form of explication of scientific or legal terms is a useful and indispensable function of this method. I intend to criticize the way Jackson imagines this method can help us in addressing some metaphysical questions like those of free will and mind.

For this purpose, firstly, I outline Jackson's view of conceptual analysis, its relationship to a priori knowledge, and what he considers their indispensable role in philosophy (Sect.2). Next, I consider his revision of Quine's criticism and why he thinks conceptual analysis can be preserved in the face of this criticism (Sect. 3). Finally, I argue that Jackson's defense faces some difficulties in both motivating the need for conceptual analysis and justifying the authority of a priori results that this method gives us.

2. Motivating conceptual analysis: Jackson's view

Jackson starts from the context in which the need for conceptual analysis arises. He argues that one serious view in metaphysics is physicalism, that is, the thesis that all beings are either physical or are supervenient on the physical. He discusses that one of the important implications of this thesis would be that there should be an explanatory relationship between the concepts in our ordinary language like beliefs, free will, and intentional actions that describe our commonsense

understanding of ourselves and the world and the scientific concept in our physics' theories that describe the world in terms of interactions of atoms and particles (Jackson 1998, 30).

To make this relationship clear let us consider an example briefly. We have two sets of vocabulary about the world: ordinary folk concepts about human actions involving intentional states and scientific descriptions that do not use such concepts. To use the terminology used by Wilfred Sellars (1962), we have two "images of man": a manifest and a scientific image. Those physicalist metaphysicians who are realists about intentional or mental states do not have the luxury of dismissing concepts of the manifest image as mere illusions. In other words, they cannot be eliminativist about concepts like intentional states and free will. Rather, they have to come up with ways of translating the vocabulary in the manifest image into those in the scientific image of the man. As Jackson puts it, they have to show how these two sets of concepts are "entailed" and how the "physical story of the world makes true the intentional story about it" (Jackson 1998, 29).

Jackson assumes that without this translation and clarifying this entailment, being a physicalist and also a realist about intentional states and free will is an "act of faith" not to be taken seriously. Hence, serious metaphysical doctrines like physicalism should be committed to the "completeness" of their physical account of the nature of the world and hence to the "entailment thesis." Essential for this commitment is conceptual analysis, because to answer the question of how our story with intentional concepts is made true by our story with physical concepts, one has to first define terms like intentionality and free will. This definition should not be arbitrary, rather, it should be authoritative in the sense that when we define the concept of free will in a specific manner, we can expect others to use that concept in the same manner (Jackson 1998, 31).

For example, consider the scenario when one decides to arbitrarily define free will as ‘the ability to do otherwise if one chooses so.’ Then one proceeds to say free will under this definition is compatible with the deterministic picture of physics and hence entailment between these sets of concepts holds. One possible objection could be that it might work under this definition, but why should we assume that this definition is the right one and not another one under which the entailment does not hold? For example, if one defines free will as actions uncaused and undetermined by past events and general laws, then the compatibilist views and the mentioned entailment will not hold. Instead, one might want to drop one’s realism and become eliminativist about free will.

For Jackson, the source of authority in choosing one definition of free will over another is the apriori truths lurking in our folk theory and languages. In other words, he argues that philosophical reasoning can claim to define free will (or other ordinary concepts) in this and not another way, because it claims that people intuitively and universally define the concept in this way and not in other ways. He takes another step and argues that what philosophers are interested in, when they ask how people define the concept X in different contexts, is not an empirical psychological or linguistic question like how children aged 4-6 use the concept of causality. Instead, philosophers qua philosophers only look at this evidence and imagine hypothetical scenarios to grasp something more pure and more universal. Jackson calls this something “apriori results” of conceptual analysis (Jackson 1998, 47).

Before discussing what exactly Jackson means by “apriori”, we should highlight two other assumptions in his picture of the role of conceptual analysis. Firstly, he assumes that there are ordinary, naturally given, and intuitive ways of using commonsense concepts by people. These intuitive ways may coincide and lead to a collective intuitive way of using a concept that he calls

a “folk theory” of that concept. These ways of using concepts can vary and can be empirically studied. Secondly, he assumes that sometimes (and not always) these folk theories could be good indications for discovering apriori results, but sometimes they just might be eliminated by scientific progress. What we thought to be an apriori true statement about the concept of free will might turn out to be an aposteriori statement that is shown to be also wrong by empirical discovery. I call the first assumption, the ‘naturally givenness’ assumption, and the second one the ‘non-guaranteed apriori results.’ I will come back to all of these two assumptions and his entailment and completeness assumption in Sect. 4, where I criticize his account. Now let us turn to his account of apriori truths.

2.1. What makes some truths apriori ones?

Jackson draws on Saul Kripke’s (1980) *Naming and Necessity* and Kripke’s analysis of possible worlds to account for what he considered the desirable outcome of conceptual analysis, that is, “apriori results.” He argues that concepts or terms (and also sentences) can apply to the cases in the world in two different ways. Firstly, we might consider objects or cases that a term applies to be in different hypothetical situations (possible worlds), but these hypotheses are all about the actual world. Secondly, we might consider the same objects are picked by our terms in different hypothetical situations, but these hypothetical situations could belong to any possible world, that is, the hypotheses could be counterfactual. We can describe the first way our terms pick out objects in this way: our term “water” picks out its objects in the actual world (its actual-extensions) and hence this term has an intension that we can call its actual-intension. By intension, it is intended to mean the function that assigns objects to the term in possible worlds. Likewise, the same term, water, can have counterfactual-extensions and counterfactual-intension (Jackson 1998, 48-49).

So, for example, insofar as the counterfactual world that we are considering is our own actual world, then the actual and the counterfactual extensions of the term water are the same watery examples we are acquainted with, and therefore their intensions are the same. In this condition, all we have to know to use the term “water” to pick out the right examples is to know the language and be acquainted with watery examples for speakers of that language. This is apriori knowledge because it is enough to know the concept in the language. However, if we want to know what the term “water” picks out in the counterfactual worlds then it is not enough to have perceptual acquaintance with watery examples known for that community of speakers. Instead, we have to know about water as a natural kind with specific underlying mechanisms constituting it as a natural kind, namely, atomic and molecular mechanisms that shape water as H₂O. This is an aposteriori result and is gained by empirical discovery.

Now, let us consider the term free will, of which we do not have a scientific account. When we are dealing with concepts or terms about which we do not know the underlying causal mechanisms that establish them as the natural kind, we have two options: we can give up on defining them in ways that enable us to use them in all the possible worlds, or we can consider an authoritative definition for them based on analyzing their actual intensions and how they might be used in other hypothetical scenarios. Then we can postulate that even though this definition does not include their natural kind meaning, this definition is part of the fundamental conceptual framework of our language or cognition. No matter which world we are living in, as long as we have the same fundamental conceptual framework, we will pick out certain objects under this definition of the term.

To use Jackson’s own terminology, conceptual analysis deals with the actual intensions and references of terms like free will that we can know about independently of our empirically

achievable knowledge. In the next step, conceptual analysis can make a leap and claim that the clarified actual intension of the term free will in our language is identical to its counterfactual intension, because it might be the case that our language or fundamental conceptual framework keeps the same intension to pick out certain objects regardless of the underlying mechanisms. It is not the objects (reference of terms), their underlying mechanisms, and their nature (counterfactual extensions) that determine whether our language keeps its intensions the same in different worlds. It is the inherent structure of our language or its fundamental conceptual framework that determines that. Conceptual analysis is concerned with “making explicit what is, and what is not, covered by some term in our language.” Jackson calls concepts whose actual and counterfactual extensions differ “two-dimensional” concepts or terms. These concepts can change their intensions and get counterfactual intensions that go beyond their actual intensions like the term water. His argument is that it is not clear whether all of our concepts can be two-dimensional and get new intensions. They might have the same actual and counterfactual intension regardless of changing which world is the actual world. What determines which concepts are two-dimensional does not depend on empirical discovery. Hence, it is an apriori result (Jackson 1998, 51).

So actual intensions of a term that can be known without empirical knowledge of causal mechanisms could be called the first aspect of apriori results that conceptual analysis can discover. Also, concepts with identical actual and counterfactual intensions are apriori and conceptual analysis is after discovering them. Jackson holds that we can hope or assume that actual and counterfactual intensions of the terms we have conceptually analyzed are the same unless we are proven wrong. Therefore, even if we grant that there are apriori truths about our concepts in the second sense (its dimensionality), they are not obvious to us and we cannot be sure. I will call this

aspect of Jackson's account 'ambiguity of the second sense of apriori', and I will come back to it in Sect.4.

3. Revisiting Quine: Jackson's defense of conceptual analysis

Briefly put, Quine's criticism is that there is no way to define analyticity based on criteria like "true in all possible worlds", "synonymy" or "semantic rule of a language" because in all these cases we already presuppose a notion of analyticity. We happen to have this dogmatic analytical-synthetic distinction because we wrongly assume that the meaning of synthetic sentences is determined one-by-one by clarifying their method of empirical confirmation (verificationist theory of meaning) and hence there can be sentences that can be conceived of as individually true by virtue of meaning and hence analytical. Instead, the meaning of each statement and its truth is judged holistically in relation to other statements and empirical evidence, not individually (Quine 1951).

In other words, our language or conceptual schemes do not commit us to any assumption about the reality of concepts like free will in a way that is in principle different from how our empirical theories commit us to ontological postulations. The reason for this is that our body of knowledge or conceptual scheme is an interconnected holistic network and the process of modifying it is also a holistic one. There is no sharp boundary between that part of our conceptual scheme that we call apriori and that we call aposteriori. When we modify our system of ontological postulations and beliefs to accommodate for new progress in our sciences, we can modify what is deemed to be the apriori or analytic part as well as the other parts. "Our ontology is determined once we have fixed upon the over-all conceptual scheme which is to accommodate science in the broadest sense; and the considerations which determine a reasonable construction of any part of that conceptual

scheme, e.g. the biological or the physical part, are not different in kind from the considerations which determine a reasonable construction of the whole” (Quine 1948, 36).

Jackson claims that he agrees with Quine’s criticism in practice without giving up on the apriori truths. He argues that there is nothing sacred about folk theory. Remember that he thinks that conceptual analysis of folk theory is not supposed to give us apriori results all of the time. Folk theory might be refuted or modified in the light of “empirical discovery about us and the world” (Jackson 1998, 44).¹

However, the fact that something that we assumed apriori in our language turns out to be aposteriori and changeable only shows that we were wrong about what we considered to be apriori and it was not determinately apriori. However, this does not show that there are no apriori results. The fact that we can move the boundary between apriori and aposteriori does not mean that there is no boundary. Compatibilist philosophers could still analyze the folk concept of free will and get apriori results. They can either define it in a way that is clarified and similar to the folk use of or define it in a new way that is “near enough” to the folk’s concept “to be regarded as a natural extension of it, and which does the theoretical job we folk give the concept” (Jackson 1998, 45).

¹ One of Quine’s main criticisms in his famous *Two Dogmas* (1951) is that those analyses of analytical statements that are based on possible world views (he mentions both Leibniz’s notion of possible worlds and Carnap’s state-description) cannot account for the analyticity of statements like “all bachelors are unmarried” because terms like “bachelor” and “unmarried” are not logically equivalent (like terms “married” and “un-un-unmarried”). They are what he calls “cognitive synonyms”. Synonyms assume analyticity and cannot conceptually ground them. All possible world accounts can only show that two terms are synonyms in this sense and not explain their analyticity. Jackson uses an updated version of the possible world account offered by Kripke. However, he does not discuss how this new account can solve the Quinean challenge. Since he does not discuss this matter explicitly, I will focus on criticizing his views where he is more explicitly committed.

4. “Near enough”: limits of Jackson’s defense

Now, we have reviewed Jackson’s defense of conceptual analysis and his revision of Quine’s criticism. Let us consider the problems with his defense. I will go through problematic assumptions in different steps of his argument.

4.1. Commitment to completeness and entailment.

Crucial for Jackson motivating the need for conceptual analysis is that serious metaphysics has to figure out a way to define concepts at different levels of description of reality (e.g. physical, psychological, and folk-psychological) to show how they are entailed by each other and physical true statements make true the folk-psychological ones. If physicalism is true and we are realist about free will, then there should be entailment between our free will concepts and some physics concepts. This is a very problematic assumption because it implicitly holds that physicalism as a metaphysical doctrine can define (in a nontrivial way) the physical and we can postulate the completeness of the statement that the whole reality is physical. This assumption has been challenged by methodological physicalism.

Methodological physicalism rests on a specific criticism leveled against the metaphysical commitments of physicalism. According to this criticism, our latest theories in physics and our common-sense understanding of the concept of matter or the physical do not provide us with any definite content of the concept of the physical. Hempel’s dilemma (1969), van Fraassen’s (2002) attitudinal physicalism, and Chomsky’s methodological naturalism (1995) are the most prominent

formulations of this criticism.² Here I focus on Chomsky's formulation because I think it serves the goal of this paper better.

Chomsky's argument against metaphysical physicalism (1995, 2000) is that there is no a priori or a posteriori way to assign a well-defined meaning to the concept of the physical. There is no a priori way because there is no tenable a priori concept of the physical grounded in the natural language, folk knowledge, or metaphysics. Our sciences always make counter-intuitive theoretical developments and there is no justification to impose a constraint on these developments in an a priori way. The only constraints on "what gets postulated in physics are considerations of explanatory adequacy, empirical adequacy, and any other demands on the rational conduct of scientific inquiry." Any attempt to assign a priori definitions of the physical will fail unless it defines it so openly that can include anything that our changing commonsense or sciences happen to tell us is physical. In that case, these definitions end up being trivial truisms and not a distinct non-trivial metaphysical thesis. Also, there is no a posteriori way because theories in physics "evolve openly." Open and evolving theories in physics cannot provide a sufficiently well-defined concept of the physical for the purpose of framing a metaphysical thesis. "The class of physical entities viewed historically (i.e., those entities that have been, are, or will be postulated by physicists) exhibits no integrity beyond being the class of entities postulated by physicists in the course of doing their work" (Poland 2003, 33).

Chomsky also articulates the implications of his challenge to physicalism. For him physicalism can still hold, but in a methodological sense. Methodological physicalism acts as regulative ideals

² Chomsky uses the term methodological naturalism and not methodological physicalism. Like Jeffery Poland's (2003) account of Chomsky's challenge for physicalism, here I use the terms methodological physicalism and methodological physicalism interchangeably.

that call for unification in science, that is, a certain sort of integration of “ways of looking at the world.” This means that given “multiple levels of description and explanation” in sciences, one should look for how these different theories and levels are related. This relation does not necessarily imply reduction, but a set of possible ways like integration and mutual modifications of two theories while keeping their explanatory autonomy. Deciding on which type of relatedness is a matter of empirical inquiry and not a priori speculations. There is no reason why total reduction should already be assumed as the best or preferable option (Chomsky 1993 80-86, quoted in Poland 2003 39).

Thus, our sciences give us no guarantee that our reality is integrated and unified (let alone reducible to the physical level of reality). Our physical concepts and folk-psychological concepts describe two levels of reality. There is no need for them to be entailed and our reality to be unified and intelligible. As Chomsky has pointed out, since the Newtonian criticism of Cartesian contact mechanics, we humbly replaced the hope of making the whole world intelligible and unified with the hope of making our theories intelligible and relatively unified (Chomsky 2000). If this is how serious sciences work, it is not at all clear why should we hold “serious metaphysics” to different standards of completeness and entailment. In that case, we can be realists about free will without a need to conceptually analyze free will to be made true by physical statements.

4.2. Other problematic assumptions

Now let us consider other problematic assumptions in his argumentation. He assumes that folk concepts are a convergence of individual intuitive ways of using a concept by speakers and they are naturally given in this way. This is not a wrong assumption; however, it is a very misleading one. The way that people intuitively use folk concepts might be the result of how their social structures and interactions have shaped their lives and behavior. So, they could be conditioned by

the historical and social factors. Imagine a patriarchal capitalistic society that regulates social relations in ways that individualistic self-interest is prioritized. Members of that society are conditioned by their economic and legal institutions to talk about human freedom, free will, moral responsibility, and gender in a very individualistic and patriarchal way and not for example in a relational and collective way. Imagine that this way of regulating social relations leads to oppressive life conditions for those people. An analytical philosopher of that hypothetical society would only conceptually analyze concepts of freedom and free will as it is socially conditioned by that society. He will propose definitions that are either identical or “natural extensions” of the dominant concepts. In this way, the analytical philosopher is reproducing the oppressive conditions by staying close to the naturally given concepts. Moreover, if he considers his definitions as apriori results, then he has eternalized those concepts and has taken away the possibility of changing the concepts and the social relationships that they regulate and interpret for social actors. This criticism has been leveled against apriori views of folk-psychological concepts by philosophers like Sally Haslanger (2020).

Finally, Jackson argues that apriori results are not guaranteed outcomes of conceptual analysis, but we could still hold they can exist. Also, he defines these apriori results as applicable not only to the actual intension of a term but also to the counterfactual intensions of the analyzed concept. Two things are not clear. Firstly, we know what is the actual intension of an analyzed concept because we use it in our folk way of talking about the world. But we do not know if the concept that we are using is actually a fundamental inherent part of our language (namely if it has similar actual and counterfactual intension). Even if we grant that there are these inherent structures in our language, it is not clear why should we grant that they are the same concepts that are currently used in our folk concepts. We might be wrong about one concept and with empirical discovery

realize that it is not apriori. Why cannot we be wrong about the whole set of concepts that we consider to be apriori and used in our ordinary language? The set of true apriori concepts might be something totally different from the set of our ordinary language concepts. It is possible that all of our natural language concepts are aposteriori and real apriori concepts are part of an ideal language. This is a very speculative possibility but still a possibility. If this is the case, then why should we assume that we can find apriori results in analyzing natural and ordinary language concepts?

Secondly, Jackson criticizes William Lycan's view (1988) that we can give up large chunks of our folk concept of free will because progress in our science could undermine them and still hold that our concept of free will refers to some reality without being descriptively true according to a casual-historical theory of reference. Jackson says if we allow giving up too much of our folk theory of free will, then we will end up changing the subject, while the goal is to keep the subject (concept of free will) and define it authoritatively in a way that is close enough to our intuitive understanding and also consistent with our sciences. It is not at all clear what is the meaning of "near enough" in Jackson's argument. Also, he ends up reiterating Lycan's position. He argues that if our sciences tell us that a part of our apriori knowledge is wrong, then we can conclude that apriori knowledge was not really apriori (Jackson 1998, 52-54). In that case, we have to give up on that apriori knowledge and accept the aposteriori results. This is like Lycan's approach which allows for giving up a large chunk of our intuitive understanding. If that is the case, then conceptual analysis of free will does not give us authoritative definitions regardless of our sciences.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I reviewed Frank Jackson's defense of conceptual analysis and flagged some of the problems with his defense. If I am right about my criticisms, then, firstly, we do not desperately need conceptual analysis because neither our science nor metaphysics need to be committed to

completeness and entailment. This was shown by methodological physicalism. Secondly, conceptual analysis does not give us the expected results. If we expect the conceptual analysis to give us apriori results (in the sense of counterfactual intensions) we are mistaken. There is no fundamental reason to assume that any of our ordinary and natural language concepts are a good way to start to dig for real apriori results. It is equally possible that these results are not discoverable by the human mind. Thirdly, if we can give up apriori results with empirical discovery, then Lycan (1988) is right that we can give up large chunks of our folk concept of free will and still be realist about free will. There is no need to define free will in a way that is near enough to or a natural extension of the folk concept of free will to be a realist about free will. Finally, as Haslanger (2020) has argued, conceptual analysis might lead to reproducing or eternalizing oppressive social relations and deceptive socially conditioned concepts. At least for these reasons, I think, we can do well without conceptual analysis.

More positively, methodological physicalism opens up an alternative productive way of dealing with questions like free will. Methodological physicalism allows us to be realists about free will and also the ontological postulations of our sciences. The question of relating these different groups of concepts and entities should only be approached scientifically and empirically and not metaphysically and by apriorism. These gaps might remain a “mystery” according to Chomsky. Meanwhile, methodological physicalism enables us to not only be realists about both our non-scientific and scientific concepts but also allows us to be more creative in using these concepts. We can reorganize our sciences, and their ontological postulations based on new notions of causation and reality. There is no apriori metaphysical chain that prevents us from doing that. Finally, methodological physicalism allows us to be creative in defining our folk concepts. We can consider defining folk concepts like free will based on pragmatic considerations about these

definitions to improve our social life. We can even introduce an engineered concept of free will or freedom into our science of human or animal behavior if it helps us to have better empirical or explanatory adequacy.

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