"Putting the linguistic method in its place": Mackie's distinction between conceptual and factual analysis[1]

Tammo Lossau, Johns Hopkins University

ABSTRACT: Early in his career and in critical engagement with ordinary language philosophy, John Mackie developed the roots of a methodology that would be fundamental to his thinking: Mackie argues that we need to clearly separate the *conceptual analysis* which determines the meaning of an ordinary term and the *factual analysis* which is concerned with the question what, if anything, our language corresponds to in the world. I discuss how Mackie came to develop this distinction and how central ideas of his philosophy are based on it. Using the examples of Mackie's moral skepticism and his work on Locke's theory of perception I show how his methodology opens the door to error theories but can also support more positive claims. Finally, I put Mackie's methodology in a historical perspective and argue that in cases like the Gettier debate, we can use it to cast light on the vagueness of the underlying methodology in some philosophical debates.

John Mackie begins the preface to his 1973 volume *Truth Probability and Paradox* as follows (Mackie 1973, vii, my emphasis):

> Philosophy, to be any good, must be analytic; but conceptual analysis is not the whole of philosophy. Any genuine progress with philosophical problems requires the sort of argument that takes account of alternative possibilities, that formulates suggestions precisely enough to allow them to be examined and tested, that pays attention to the meaning of the words it uses,

and that reflects critically on its own procedures. But the aim is to make progress with substantive questions, *to apply our concepts to reality or to consider how far they are applicable, not merely to analyse or clarify those concepts themselves*.

This paragraph contains an endorsement of what we know to be the core value of analytic philosophy today: clarity. But more interestingly, it contains a statement of Mackie's own resolution to a methodological challenge of analytic philosophy more traditionally understood: analytic philosophers in this sense engage in conceptual analysis; but the history of ordinary language philosophy has taught them how limited conclusions about the best analysis of a given concept really are. Mackie wants philosophy to address more "substantive questions", and he suggests to do so by thinking about whether and to what extent the concepts so analyzed apply to reality. This may sound harmless or even obvious, but there is a flip side to this that leads Mackie to some of his more radical conclusions: the methodology he has at this point developed consists in a two-step procedure. First, concept C is analyzed "blind" of whether any of the candidates for an analysis will be applicable to reality; second, the applicability of the best analysis of C is considered – Mackie (1973, 12) calls this a *factual analysis*. The separation of these two steps leaves room for a mismatch between concept and reality, i.e. a situation in which no real entities correspond to C. It is this mismatch that gives rise to the kind of *error theories* Mackie is perhaps most famous for.

I will discuss Mackie's take on the methodological challenge for analytic philosophy around the sunset of ordinary language philosophy and his response to it. Then I will show how Mackie implements his solution to this challenge discussing two examples: Mackie's moral skepticism and his interpretation of Locke's views on perception. Finally, I will add some historical remarks on how Mackie's perspective of conceptual analysis differs from some of his contemporaries and argue that becoming clear about these differences can be useful to philosophical debates using the debate about knowledge as an example.

1. Strength and Weakness of "Linguistic Philosophy"

During his philosophical education in Sydney and Oxford just before the second world war, Mackie experienced ordinary language philosophy (OLP) as the dominant strand of philosophy, especially in Britain; and this continued to be his impression at the time when he wrote his first publications after having served in the war (cf. Mackie 1956, 3). A striking example of this is a series of papers in which Mackie (1951a, 1952) defends John Anderson (his former teacher in Sydney) against criticisms from Gilbert Ryle (1950) and Peter Herbst (1952). Ryle criticized Anderson for his descriptivist account of ethics. Mackie (1951a, 109) responds:

> Ryle is assuming that the task of philosophy is to analyse linguistic usage, and as an analysis of the bulk of existing ethical usage Anderson's ethics would be absurd. In fact Anderson would agree that if one wanted to analyse this usage – a task in which he is not particularly interested – one would have to say that ethical terms have a prescriptive force, that (in Ryle's language) the job they do is not merely a descriptive one. But Anderson is concerned with something else, with the qualities of human activities, and here it is the prescriptive view that is, if not absurd, at least very queer. It would be very strange if the character of an activity should itself command its performance.

Mackie (1951a, 110) argues that "Ryle is concerned with linguistic analysis whereas Anderson is concerned with the features of the things talked about" and that this difference leads Ryle to misunderstand Anderson in several ways. Mackie does not so much as decidedly defend Anderson's actual views, but he does defend the idea of investigating questions other than the analysis of our usage of words.

The question of whether or not Ryle is really restricting himself to only analyzing such usage is the topic of two further papers by Herbst (1952) and Mackie (1952) in this debate. Herbst argues that Ryle is not restricting himself in this way, but Mackie (1952, 117) responds that if indeed he is not, his criticism "becomes even sharper; it will be that these philosophers try to settle non-linguistic questions by appeal to linguistic usage." As an example of such overstepping of the boundaries of ordinary language philosophy, he cites his discussion of Stephen Toulmin's (1950) views on ethics (Mackie 1951b). Toulmin uses linguistic arguments to advocate a version of rule-utilitarianism, but Mackie criticizes that he is ambivalent as to whether he means to hold this position merely as an analysis of our "moral talk" or whether he thinks that his position has any prescriptive force. In the former case, Toulmin would not be doing ethics proper, but in the latter case he would be guilty of overstating the conclusion of his arguments (cf. Mackie 1956, 9-11). The same dilemma appears to apply to Ryle: either he is merely concerned with an analysis of moral talk, and thereby talking past Anderson, or he is not, but then he would be inferring an "ought" from an "is".

Mackie's experience with OLP the passage quoted above reveals is this: OLP restricts itself to conceptual analysis, and it imposes this restriction as normative for philosophy as a whole. This means that even works not written within the tradition of OLP are evaluated by the same standards, namely whether what they claim can be taken as an appropriate analysis of the ordinary usage of the central terms involved in it. From Mackie's perspective, this is unfair towards philosophers like Anderson who do not take up the task of providing such an analysis. Ordinary language philosophers should, on Mackie's view, restrict themselves to understanding our usage of words – and leave people like Anderson alone. If they do not, they are guilty of making an inference from statements about our linguistic usage to statements that are about a different subject, and Mackie does not see any justification for this. He later writes that ordinary language is "in principle incapable of deciding a philosophical issue" (Mackie 1969, 113).

We can hear Mackie's frustration about this perceived unfairness in his inaugural lecture for his professorship at the University of Otago entitled *Ordinary Linguistic Philosophy – Its Strength and Its Weakness*. For example, we can hear Mackie (1956, 15-6) complain about the lack of clarity and the tendency not to state a clear conclusion, in particular aiming at Wittgenstein. He also opens with the following characterization of ordinary language philosophy (Mackie 1956, 3, emphasis in original):

> [P]hilosophers of this school [linguistic philosophy] hold that traditional philosophy is full of confusions which are mainly due to misunderstandings of the use of words, and they make it their task to diagnose and clarify such confusions. As a rule they rely on *ordinary language*: they appeal from the usage of the philosophers, which is often confused, to that of the man on the street, who, they believe, cannot afford to talk nonsense.

Mackie is particularly critical of the "conformist" strands of OLP, which hold that the implicit philosophical views held by the man on the street must be agreed with. Despite these overtones of contempt, Mackie does not attack the "linguistic method" of conceptual analysis *per se*, but merely argues that it needs to be "put in its place". The way in which he suggests to do so crucially depends on the following distinction (Mackie 1956, 14):

> In fact, the very notion of linguistic analysis is systematically ambiguous. Ordinary linguistic behaviour will contain, implicit in its verbal procedures, the philosophical assumptions of the ordinary man: to analyse it may mean simply to reproduce and emphasize and perhaps make explicit these assumptions; or, again, it may mean to see through the ordinary behaviour to the facts, to see real things the words refer to, and what people are actually doing with words as distinct from what they think they are doing with them.

This is where Mackie first hints at the distinction between "reproductive" *conceptual analysis* and *factual analysis* which I have already mentioned above.[2] Mackie does not try to reject either of these approaches. With respect to conceptual analysis, he recognizes it to be a legitimate project (cf. Mackie 1952, 117), but he rejects that any conclusions can be drawn from such an analysis alone that goes beyond statements about our ordinary usage. The clearest criticism of this "conformist" attitude is found in a later paper where Mackie brands it as a "dogma" that our ordinary language is in order (Mackie 1973, 11):

> What I want to reject now is […] the sheer assumption that ordinary language is in order, that once analysis has separated the components of any ordinary concept, its very ordinariness will glue them together again. Merely to employ a concept may be to make an implicit assertion, for example to assert that what users of the associated terms ordinarily intend to record or convey goes along with the features on which the habit of recognition which is part of that concept relies. This assertion cannot be eliminated on the ground that we cannot mean anything beyond what is utilized by the habit of recognition; nor can it be accepted without further question on the ground that the concept is an ordinary one.

Unwrapping this, what Mackie means with the "habit of recognition" are the aspects of the object that lead us to think that something falls under a concept. For instance, seeing a finned animal swimming in the sea might lead us to believe that we are seeing a fish – but Mackie would argue that in the case of whales, we would be mistaken in that inference because what we *actually mean* by a "fish" excludes whales. Now, most language users accept the distinction between whale and fish, so this is not actually an example where ordinary language is not in order – but it is easy to think of a linguistic community where this distinction is not accepted. In such a case, the strand of ordinary language philosophy

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2   I will use these two terms here only in Mackie's sense, recognizing that "conceptual analysis" is often understood in a much broader sense.

Mackie has in view here would be committed to argue that on this usage, whales do qualify as fish and that therefore this usage is not to be criticized; whereas Mackie would argue that this usage is flawed as it leads to a bundling together of objects that do not share the assumed similarities.

A reproductive conceptual analysis, as Mackie envisions it, should therefore not take sides on whether any of what ordinary users of a term have in mind is real or correct. He simply views this as "quasi-empirical study" (Mackie 1956, 16), which has the advantage of giving philosophers a scientifically legitimate task. But the limits of this endeavor create a dilemma for OLP (Mackie 1956, 17):

> [T]his empiricism about language is one source of the strength of this movement: it lets its members feel that they have something new to do and something new to say […] But at the same time these students of language are faced with a dilemma: Are they really making an empirical study of linguistic behaviour – and, if so, are they not merely usurping the functions of the grammarian or the linguist in the ordinary sense? Or are they still studying philosophy and merely clearing linguistic obstacles out of its way, treating language, that is, only as a source of misleading suggestions against which we must be on our guard – and, if so, are they not doing metaphysics after all?

Mackie's own sympathies lie at the second horn of this dilemma where one would follow up on the conceptual analysis with a factual analysis. For one thing, he states that he is "better pleased with a philosophy that disturbs than with one that consoles" (Mackie 1956, 15). For another, contrary to adherents of OLP he has no problem with doing metaphysics (in the broad sense applicable here).

Mackie's lecture quoted here chiefly engages critically with OLP and does not do more than hint at a positive methodological suggestion that "puts the linguistic method in its place". Such a positive account is more clearly and explicitly suggested in the opening chapter of *Truth Probability and Paradox* (TPP) which I have quoted at the beginning of this paper. TPP, published in 1973, stands at the beginning of the last decade of Mackie's life. In this decade, Mackie began to publish his ideas in

book form – he had tended to focus on articles, often short ones, up until that point. During this period, Mackie published books on themes from Locke (Mackie 1976), moral error theory (Mackie 1977), the analysis of causation (Mackie 1980a), Hume's views on morality (Mackie 1980b) and a critical textbook on philosophy of religion (Mackie 1982). While these books include many ideas and arguments Mackie had worked on before, it seems that he had settled on a perspective that allowed him to put his thoughts on these subjects together in a systematic way. I want to suggest here that his distinction of conceptual and factual analysis is an important part of how he was able to systematically work on such a wide range of topics – I will try to make this point by discussing examples in the following section.

But what exactly is Mackie's methodology? As the opening passage from TPP quoted at the beginning of this paper suggests, Mackie thinks conceptual analysis can be the first step of an interesting philosophical investigation, which then goes on to apply this clarified concept to the world. He elaborates on this idea in the first chapter of TPP using Hume's analysis of causation as an illustrative example.[3] Mackie (1973, 8-9) argues that on Hume's view, our causal language both conveys that "This A contiguously precedes this B, and every A contiguously precedes a B", but in addition to that it also conveys a "link" between cause and effect, such that one "pushes or pulls the other into existence". Assuming, at least for the sake of the argument, that this is an appropriate conceptual analysis of our causal language, Mackie (1973, 12, emphasis in original) argues:

> Hume might be right in thinking that we intend to convey that there is some sort of link between cause and effect, and yet that we are systematically wrong, that there is in fact no such link as we suppose. There is, then, a problem about the *factual* analysis of causation; we have the task

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3   Interestingly, Mackie (1946, 82) already draws the analogy with Hume's analysis of causation in his early works on moral error theory. This indicates the impact Hume had on Mackie, but also that Mackie had developed at least the core idea of this methodological framework early on and takes it to be applicable to this aspect of his philosophy.

of finding out what goes on in the world in those sequences and processes that we mark off as causal.

This factual analysis, he goes on, cannot be undertaken based on the speaker's understanding of things; and yet this analysis would be "too broad and general a topic for any of the particular sciences", so it takes philosophers to undertake it.[4] He also points out that conceptual and factual analysis need to go hand in hand, otherwise the factual analysis would be a somewhat aimless inquiry.

We can see now how Mackie thinks that conceptual analysis can help to clear up "confusions" and get "linguistic obstacles" out of the way: in order to understand the source of these confusions, we need to thoroughly investigate our usage of the relevant vocabulary. Once we have understood the claims underlying this usage, we do however need to follow up with a factual analysis and find out to what extent these claims accurately describe the real world. It is possible that our language is indeed in order, but we cannot dogmatically assume this from the start. Rather, we should do the conceptual analysis without already having an eye on the second step. This two-step procedure, then, may indeed lead to the result that our language is *not* in order, and that we are mistaken to speak about some topic in a certain way. Mackie interprets Hume as providing such an *error theory* about causation. From this perspective, it seems that OLP is concerned with an important part of what philosophers should be doing (and what people like Hume already have been doing), but it is completely ignoring another part of philosophy. This leaves OLP with the choice to restrain itself to somewhat uninteresting conclusions or to make unwarranted inferences from the conceptual to the factual. Mackie suggests that the only way out is to go back to doing more than mere conceptual analysis.

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4   One may well disagree that it is always broadness or generality that gives rise to a philosophical investigation of a factual matter. Some might even suggest that the factual analysis of causation lies within the realm of physics – although this seems true only of a narrowed use of the term common to philosophy that excludes psychological, sociological or historical causes. However, at least in the case of ethics which I will discuss below it seems clear that it takes philosophers to investigate what kind of entities relating to values there are in the world.

2. The Conceptual/Factual Distinction at Work

I have discussed how Mackie sees OLP trapped in a dilemma between self-restraint and argumentative inadequacy and how he suggests to resolve this dilemma by combining conceptual and factual analysis. It will be helpful to see how Mackie implements this program. I will discuss two examples: his moral error theory and his views on perception.

Let us begin with Mackie's views on ethics, which are both among the first he developed (Mackie 1946) and among the most influential ones up until now.[5] Mackie (1946, 77-8) addresses the issue that "we think we can also *judge* that actions and states are right and good, just as we judge about other matters of fact, that these judgments are either true or false, and that the qualities with which they deal exist objectively." He argues that statements of such judgments cannot be regarded to be simply expressions of feelings (as emotivism[6] claims), for this would not allow us to accommodate the impression that in the case of moral disagreement there is a disagreement of beliefs. In his early treatment of the topic, Mackie (1946, 81) takes the refutation of emotivism to establish that our moral statements are "describing objective facts". In his later *Ethics* (Mackie 1977, 29-35), his argumentation "that conceptual analysis would reveal a claim to objectivity" has gained in depth. Mackie now offers two considerations in favor of this claim: first, our moral judgments are anchored in a philosophical tradition which by and large subscribes to such a claim to objectivity. Second, he argues that ordinary

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5   See Joyce 2001, Joyce and Kirchin 2010 and Olson 2014 for some contemporary advocates of Mackiean views.

6   Mackie (1946, 80-1) adds against the emotivist that to say that such statements are mere expressions of feelings of approval or disapproval that introspection shows that contrary to what Stevenson claims we do not take ourselves to be "merely ejaculating when we talk in moral terms."

speakers seem to want to imply such a claim, too, when they make moral judgments; and when they wonder what is morally right, they are searching for more than just something relative to their own, or their society's desires or conventions.[7] Thus he concludes our moral judgments presuppose values[8] which are "action-directing absolutely, not contingently [like hypothetical imperatives] upon the agent's desires and inclinations" (Mackie 1977, 29). As Richard Garner (1990) points out, the idea of *absolute* direction of action which Mackie claims is presupposed in moral judgments is most plausibly understood as an *inescapable authority* these values allegedly have over us.[9]

But, as Mackie (1977, 15) begins the first chapter of *Ethics*, "[t]here are no objective values." He offers two arguments for this (Mackie 1977, 36-9; Mackie 1946): first, he argues that the historical and regional variations in moral codes seem to suggest that in most cases, people do not act according to what they believe is morally right, but conversely believe those actions to be morally right which they are already performing (or which are idealizations of what they are doing). This is more straightforwardly explained by the assumption that moral codes are conventional than by the assumption that they are distorted perceptions of objective moral truths. Second, he argues that objective moral values would be "queer" entities, for they would have to be very different from any other object we are familiar with – indeed, if we take moral statements to presuppose values of

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7   The evidence for this appears to be merely introspective, as this is simply stated as a fact about "[t]he ordinary user of moral language" (Mackie 1977, 33). One may criticize this as hasty; however, a defense or criticism of Mackie's results is not the focus of this paper.

8   In his earlier treatment, Mackie (1946) talks about facts instead of values.

9   This suggestion is more plausible than the alternative interpretation, on which those values are internally motivating. It seems that the folk usage of moral vocabulary does not rule out that some people see what is morally right but are not motivated by it. However, it seems plausible to say that it is presupposed in our folk usage that they should act in accordance with what is right. This is in line with what Mackie said with respect to the Anderson/Ryle debate (see above).

inescapable authority, no other entities we are familiar with seem to even come close to this. Relatedly, defenders of such entities would have to say how we could have any knowledge of these entities, as our regular ways of perceiving things seem to be inapt to arrive at any conclusion about them. Given all this, we seem to have reason to consider the existence of inescapably authoritative values very unlikely, and thereby to consider moral statements to be (very likely) false.

Both steps of Mackie's argument can be objected to individually, but a discussion of these objections is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to point out that Mackie would reject the following kind of complaint: we make moral statements all the time, and we make them without considering ourselves to be claiming something that is as strange as Mackie makes it out to be. Therefore we should analyze those statements in a way that allows them to be true; and if Mackie's complaints about objective values are any good, we need to look for such an analysis either in the emotivist or the constructivist camp. The idea of this objection is that the factual analysis can override, at least to some extent, the linguistic arguments for some hypothesis in the conceptual analysis. But Mackie is unwilling to recognize any interference of the factual analysis with the conceptual analysis; he argues elsewhere that "questions about the analysis of concepts or meanings are distinct from questions about what is there, about what goes on" (Mackie 1980a, 1). So if one objects to error theories *because they are error theories,* one shifts the question from one concerning what we actually *intend* to convey to one concerning what we *should* be conveying. What this shows is that Mackie's notion of conceptual analysis is still very much derived from OLP, in which our usage of words is the only acceptable type of evidence for some proposed conceptual analysis. Conceptual analysis, on this notion, needs to proceed *blind* of the factual analysis. The case of Mackie's analysis of our moral language shows how such a procedure may lead to an error theory.

Another good example of the separation of conceptual and factual analysis are Mackie's views on perception which he developed in the 1960s (Mackie 1969) and more fully in his book *Problems from Locke* (Mackie 1976). While Mackie's official project here is exegetical, he does state that the theory of perception he reads Locke as subscribing to can be defended against objections; and how it can, according to Mackie, be defended is what I am interested in here.

Mackie ascribes to Locke a "representative" theory of perception according to which the contents of our perception are ideas understood as intentional objects. On this view, our perception is not veridical: we can be seeing a horse in virtue of an internal representation of a horse even when there actually is not a horse in our field of vision, i.e. the perceptive state would be identical in both cases. This view allows us to account for differences between our representation of objects and their reality. However, it is also subject to what Mackie calls the "veil-of-perception problem": Berkeley and others have held that such a position leads to the view that our entire reality is constructed of appearances, not allowing any reality beyond the content of our perceptions, thereby establishing solipsistic phenomenalism (cf. Mackie 1976, 47-53). Mackie (1976, 54-5) suggests that this objection really conjoins two separate problems:

> When it is argued that if we start within the circle of our own ideas we can never break out of that circle, […] two problems are being run together, a problem of meaning and a problem of justification. The problem of meaning is this: if all we are directly acquainted with is ideas […], how can we meaningfully assert or even speculate that there is a further reality that they represent: how can we give meaning to the terms that will express this speculation? The problem of justification is this: if all we are directly acquainted with is ideas […], how can they give us any good reason to believe that there is a further reality that they represent[?]

He argues that adapting a verificationist theory of meaning according to which the only way to answer the first question is to say what would count as evidence for statements about an external reality

conjoins these two problems and forces one to adopt phenomenalism according to which we are only acquainted with ideas. But according to Mackie a verificationist theory rests on a fundamental confusion (Mackie 1976, 56):

> From the start [a verificationist theory of meaning] seems to involve a confusion of categories, in that what has (or lacks) meaning will be a sentence or some linguistic entity, while what can be true or false, verified or falsified, confirmed or disconfirmed, is a statement, something which a meaningful sentence may be used to express or convey. The question of meaning must have been answered satisfactorily before any question of truth or verification or confirmation can arise.

It is easy to see how this maps to Mackie's more general views: we need to address the question what our assertions about an external reality such as "There is a tree outside of my window" mean as a question purely about the correct conceptual analysis of those sentences. This analysis then can be followed up on by a factual analysis: is the statement expressed by this sentence true and what evidence do I have to support this statement?

Given this distinction, Mackie argues that the answer to the question of meaning must be that the contents of our experience "*are seen as real things without us – that is outside us*" and that "everything we can assert, believe, speculate, or even question about reality is a logical construction out of the contents of our experience" (Mackie 1976, 61-2, emphasis in original). It follows that it is a different thing to say that there is a tree outside of my window than to say that I see, or seem to be seeing, a tree outside of my window. Mackie also adapts Bertrand Russell's (1912, 17-26) solution to the problem of justification according to which we can respond to skeptical doubts by saying that the hypothesis of a reality that is by and large in line with our experiences is *simpler* than any hypothesis of Cartesian

deception (Mackie 1976, 64-7). My point here is not to discuss or defend[10] Mackie's particular responses, but to point out the framework he set up for addressing them as separate questions: Mackie provides a conceptual analysis of statements about the reality and *then* opens up the question whether these statements are true or well-confirmed. In this case, he emerges with a positive answer to the second question, but the result *could* have been negative just as well. We can see how this leads him to oppose verificationism: the idea of this position is to conceptually analyze our language such that it will not make unwarranted statements about an external reality – just like emotivists and constructivists would analyze our moral language in such a way that it does not express unwarranted or false statements.

I have given two examples in which the separation of conceptual and factual analysis drives Mackie's philosophy and leads to substantial disagreement with philosophers who do not subscribe to this distinction. As both of the examples discussed above illustrate, Mackie thinks that we must proceed in our conceptual analysis *blindly,* not having an eye on the factual analysis yet. This opens up the door to error theories: our language may rest on false or unwarranted presuppositions. In fact, Mackie also holds error theories about our talk of facts (Mackie 1952) and secondary qualities (Mackie 1976, 10-11), he holds that our causal judgments express counterfactual relations unwarranted (but explained by) experience (Mackie 1980a, 54-7) and adapts Hume's argument against belief in miracles which can be read as an error theory (Mackie 1982, 13-29). These examples show that Mackie's two-step methodology *leave room* for error theories, but on the other hand they equally allow that our concepts

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10 In fact, very few epistemologists adapt Russell's response to skepticism. For one thing, it is unclear in what sense the hypothesis of a material world with roughly the features we think it has is simpler than solipsism; for another, it is also easy to object on behalf of the skeptic that this appeal to simplicity is unwarranted – after all, if a Cartesian scenario were correct, our inductive justification for simplicity would fall apart, so appealing to simplicity on this fundamental issue seems to beg the question against the skeptic.

have perfectly good applications in reality (as Mackie argues is true with respect to perception). David Lewis (1989, 136-7) admits that "strictly speaking, Mackie is right" about moral values, but that it is "a matter of temperament" whether to adapt his error theory or whether to interpret our language more favorably to common sense.[11] The discussion above should show that it is in fact a matter of methodology: if Mackie is indeed right about our moral language and the claim that there are no objective values, his error theory arises naturally from the separation of conceptual and factual analysis.

3. Mackie in Context

Having discussed Mackie's methodology and how it originated from his way of addressing OLP, let me offer more general historical remarks regarding how Mackie's methodology relates to his contemporaries and the later philosophical debate.

As we saw, Mackie was unsatisfied with OLP because it would, if argued carefully, only yield conclusions about the meaning of our language, not about anything beyond that. A staunch defender of OLP might argue that the meaning of language is the only legitimate subject of philosophical investigation and that the project of factual analysis is either not a philosophical inquiry or is bound to lead to mere speculation. But Mackie is unwilling to accept this restrained view of what philosophy can do, and he shares the desire for giving philosophy a broader territory with many of his contemporaries; for instance, we saw above how Herbst tried to defend Ryle by re-interpreting his program in a way that does allow such statements. Although arguing for this point goes beyond the scope of this paper, it is not implausible that this discomfort led a younger generation of philosophers in the 1950s to abandon OLP in the form in which Wittgenstein and Ryle had pursued it. But we also saw that Mackie

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11 A similar criticism is voiced by Frank Jackson (2000, 103-4), who accuses Mackie of favoring error theories and generally viewing the folk view as distorted.

appreciated something about OLP after all: his criticism does not target the *way* in which conceptual analysis is pursued by ordinary language philosophers. Mackie's point is to put conceptual analysis "in its place", that is to use it as a first step in a philosophical investigation and not to overstate its conclusion. But he seems to think that OLP (or at least some of it) had it right as far as the procedure for conceptual analysis goes. In particular he agrees that questions about the fact of the matter should be screened off from conceptual analysis.

Saying that Mackie appreciated something about OLP must be followed by a qualification. Mackie's methodology rests on the assumption that conceptual analysis will yield a clear enough result to allow us to test its applicability to reality – and this assumption may well be challenged. We can see here why Mackie holds Wittgenstein in contempt: Wittgenstein tends to argue that many concepts resist the kind of clear and univocal analysis that Mackie wants and needs. If, for example, we admit that the concept of a "game" cannot be spelled out in terms of necessary or sufficient conditions (cf. Wittgenstein 1953, §§66-7), it will be almost impossible to critically investigate whether the things we call a "game" actually meet the criteria for being a game. Rather, we might end up saying that the concept of a game applies wherever we usually apply it, and the only task philosophy is left with is to provide an instructive list of instances. When Mackie complains about a lack of clear conclusions, this is what he is referring to.

But Wittgenstein cannot be dismissed so easily: the idea that our ordinary concepts (or at least some of them) are fuzzy and unruly is, at the very least, an option that we need to take seriously when we approach a conceptual analysis. This has led Rudolf Carnap (1950, 5-8; 1956, 7-8; 1974, x) to suggest that instead of pondering the ordinary concepts, philosophers may suggest more precise *explications* of that concept which get rid of the vagueness of the ordinary concept but still approximates its linguistic meaning. These new concepts would be superior to the somewhat arbitrary naturally formed concepts in virtue of their exactness, fruitfulness, and simplicty. The criterion of fruitfulness allows that we take

into account factual information when deciding on an explication. Concepts that do correspond to entities in reality (of which we can justifiedly assume they exist) are more fruitful, for examples for the formulations of empirical laws, so these concepts would seem to be better explications of the relevant terms. From the Carnapian perspective, Mackie opens the door to too much vagueness in his conceptual analysis when he continues to base it solely on our usage – or at least he would have to allow it if he were to follow through on his OLP-inspired approach to conceptual analysis. At the same time, Mackie could not easily have adapted Carnap's notion of explication: construing conceptual analysis traditionally as Mackie does is a precondition for a clear separation of conceptual and factual analysis. Once one allows conceptual analysis to be revisionary, one is under pressure to allow revisions that avoid the kind of error theories Mackie is open to. In this way the factual analysis would begin to affect the conceptual analysis, something which Mackie thinks needs to be avoided.

We can see, then, one source of disagreement with Mackie's method. If one is convinced by Wittgensteinians that many of our ordinary concepts resist a precise analysis, one must be skeptical as to whether Mackie's idea of factual analysis, if such a thing is a feasible inquiry at all, can be of any use in these cases. For without a clearly stated analysis of the relevant concept, one cannot check whether this concept aptly applies to reality. One may then be tempted to sidestep ordinary language and use a more precise explication instead. But this opens the door to arguments from the factual side. Resorting to explications therefore flies in the face of the idea of investigating whether there are any such entities in a separate second step. So both Wittgensteinians and Carnapians each would have separate concerns with Mackie's methodology.

On the other hand Mackie can and does recognize other methodological approaches as long as their conclusions are not overstated. As we have seen towards the beginning of this paper, he allows for a linguistic investigation of ordinary language that merely aims to understand our usage of terms. While he suggests that philosophers may be entering linguistic territory here, he makes it clear that there is

nothing inherently wrong with this. Secondly, there is no obstacle for him to also allow explications of terms. Our ordinary language indeed contains many vague terms and one may well announce to use these terms in a slightly different way that is more precise or has the benefit of capturing real entities. However, this should not be presented as a better conceptual analysis but rather as a clarification, an alteration of a terms meaning that one makes use of for one's own purposes without claiming it to concern ordinary language.

In closing, let me look at an example where I think Mackie's reflection on conceptual and factual analysis could have been helpful: the debate about knowledge following Edmund Gettier's (1963) famous paper on the analysis of knowledge. Throughout this debate, Gettier and many others provided "counterexamples" to some suggested analysis of knowledge, i.e., they presented cases in which the suggested theory is not in line with our intuitions about whether a certain subject in that case counts as knowing. This methodology seems to suggest that the project is one of pure conceptual analysis – as an explication, the idea that knowledge is justified true belief would not be off the table simply because of a fairly limited set of circumstances in which we would find that analysis counterintuitive. On the face of it, then, the Gettier debate might be understood as a complex problem of conceptual analysis.

An interesting case in this debate is Peter Unger's (1975) suggestion to understand knowledge as requiring *infallibility* with respect to the relevant proposition. This position requires a subject to be in an epistemic position were she can rule out even the most remote possibility of error to count as knowing – a position we are only in with respect to very few propositions. Unger provides fairly elaborate linguistic arguments and an explanation why we think and talk in a way that would suggest that we know much more than we actually do. As such, Unger advocates an error theory that resembles

some of Mackie's views.[12] Some have tried to provide examples suited to show that there are clear cases of knowledge in which the relevant subject *is* fallible; but another strand of resistance comes from the fact that Unger's views are branded as skeptical. Skepticism is seen as a *non sequitur*, and analyses of knowledge that lead to the result that we lack knowledge of the external world are described as unattractive on these grounds.

This type of argument, though, does bring in the factual analysis: it uses as its premise the fact that an infallibilist analysis of knowledge deprives us of knowledge of the external world. This raises the question how the resulting analysis is to be understood: is it still a conceptual analysis that aims to interpret our use of the word "knowledge" in a way that avoids attributing a lot of (at least semantically) false assertions to us; or is it an explication that is meant as a replacement of an ordinary term that leads to confusions? In the former case, proponents of this arguments would need to elaborate why the ascription of false assertions counts against a proposed conceptual analysis; in the latter case, the question arises whether and why proponents of this argument feel bound to fairly specific counterexamples brought up in the Gettier debate and do not consider accepting these as cases of knowledge for the sake of greater simplicity. That is, if one is trying to give an *explication* of knowledge, justified true belief would still be on the table despite a limited class of counterexamples.

I have brought up the debate about knowledge because it shows that methodological considerations about conceptual analysis have stepped to the background in the post-OLP era, even though such methodological considerations would be much needed here. To a certain extent Mackie's distinction

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12 An important difference is that Mackie argues that we really think that moral values are objective or that causation involves a necessary connection between the relevant events. Unger would not say that we think that we are infallible in the strong sense he requires; inasmuch as we think about Cartesian skepticism, we likely realize our fallibility. Unger's position – or at least Jonathan Schaffer's (2004) elaboration of it – for this reason is supplemented with a pragmatic theory that explains why we convey something else than the strong semantic meaning he claims. By contrast, Mackie would claim that we express *and convey* that an action is objectively wrong when we judge it to be immoral.

between conceptual analysis and factual analysis can help get a clearer view of what certain theories may legitimately claim or what kind of evidence may count in their favor or against them. This is not to say that Mackie's methodological framework needs to be accepted: it is equally legitimate to pursue a project of giving an explication or a Wittgensteinian approach which puts greater emphasis on the manifold ways in which we can use a term. But inasmuch as one tries to use conceptual analysis as a stepping stone in one's inquiry, it is necessary to justify any way in which one allows the factual analysis to have any impact on it.

Conclusion

I have discussed how Mackie developed his distinctive approach of separating conceptual and factual analysis in reaction to ordinary language philosophy. While Mackie sees OLP in a fundamental dilemma between self-restraint and baseless claims, he adapts a notion of conceptual analysis that is in line with the ideals of OLP. His idea is to do conceptual analysis completely independent of facts other than our usage of the words, but to bring in these facts at a later stage. This opens up the door to error theories according to which our usage of language may be false or unjustified, as Mackie thinks is the true in the case of our moral language. However, as Mackie's discussion of Locke's theory of perception shows, his methodology also has the potential to defend positive claims. Mackie's idea of a conceptual analysis must be distinguished from a perspective that favors Wittgensteinian cluster concepts or Carnapian explications. However, I have tried to point out using the example of the debate about knowledge that if one does pick up on a notion of conceptual analysis akin to Mackie's, one needs to respond to the distinction between conceptual and factual analysis and is under pressure to justify any instance in which one allows elements of the factual analysis to affect the conceptual analysis.

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