CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS FOR REPRESENTATIONALISTS

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Summary
We use words to mark out patterns in nature. This is why a word like ‘nutritious’ is so useful. One way of thinking about conceptual analysis is as the business of capturing the structure in the patterns so picked out, for it is not credible that the patterns are one and all sui generis. This paper spells out this way of thinking about conceptual analysis. Along the way we discuss: the role of intuitions about possible cases with some reference to the experimental philosophy debate, why analyses are often hard to find, and whether conceptual analysis so conceived presupposes a controversial version of the description theory of reference.

1. Introduction

People differ in where they draw the boundary between trees and shrubs. What’s a good way to find out where some particular person, Mary let’s suppose, draws the boundary? One way is to see how she classifies individual examples. This method has to be used with care (as does any method). For example, we need to be sure that she has the requisite information, that she’s not suffering from the kind of hangover Bob Newhart’s pilot suffered from, and that she’s bearing in mind possible consequences for other classifications that she makes—‘Hold on. In other contexts you take account of what’s normal. The plant you’ve just said is a shrub is of a type that is normally much bigger. Shouldn’t you, to be consistent, classify it as a (stunted) tree?’ But even with these caveats, there is something essentially right about the idea that way to find out the cases someone uses a word ‘W’ for, their concept of W, lies seeing how they classify putative examples. How else might we approach the question of which cases someone uses the term ‘dictator’ for, their concept of dictator, other than by seeing which cases they use the word for? It is their concept we are investigating after all.
What we have here is a bit of folk wisdom. We analytical philosophers might describe it as ‘conceptual analysis using the method of intuitions about possible cases’ but that should not disguise the fact that it is folk wisdom and not some arcane bit of technology special to our profession. The folk know perfectly well that very many terms—‘tree’ and ‘dictator’ being two examples among a host—serve to classify things, that what gets classified are putative examples, that people may differ in the classifications they make with some given term, and that a good way to find out about possible differences is to do some intelligent questioning focussed on putative examples. But folk wisdom can raise difficult questions, questions properly for philosophers. We’ll be concerned with three: the extraction problem; what to say about the case of knowledge (here we’ll touch on some of the questions raised under the heading of ‘experimental philosophy’); and, in a short final section, with what to say about the suggestion that the project of conceptual analysis presupposes a controversial—indeed, according to some, a discredited—theory of reference.

I will set the discussion in the context of a representationalist picture of thought and language. It seems to me that conceptual analysis makes best sense against this background. I don’t see this as giving a hostage to fortune. That thought and language represent seems to me sufficiently obvious to be a proper starting point.

2. The representationalist background

I am looking at a tree. My perceptual experience represents that there is a tall tree about five metres in front of me. It represents that things are a certain way, that the world I am in is a certain way—the way with a tall tree five meters in front of me. I might use a sentence to capture this representational content, most obviously the sentence ‘There is a tall tree about five meters in front of me’. True, my perceptual experience will be much richer than can be captured in a short sentence and its total content will outrun my linguistic capacities. But what will be true is that part of how my perceptual experience represents things to be can be given in a sentence.

This means that there is a notion of content—call it representational content—that corresponds to a partition among possible worlds. Perceptual experience represents that the world—the huge complex structure that we inhabit for a very short time—is a certain way, and that ipso facto

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