

When meaning goes by the board, what about philosophy?

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1. Philosophy as the Pursuit of Meaning

Philosophy is usually considered to be searching out the most general, and hence also the most necessary and the most eternal, truth; its central part, ontology, is often assumed to be fastening upon whatever might be "the form of the world". And because our world is the world as formed by the way we comprehend it and by the way we cope with it by means of our language, it is often assumed that its form must be brought out by the analysis of the interrelations between the meanings of our words and our statements. This is why many philosophers, and analytic philosophers in particular, say that philosophy consists in the analysis of meaning.

However, to maintain that philosophy is in this way interlocked with necessary truth and with meaning is no longer a simple matter. Both these concepts are being constantly challenged. Is there, after all, something like necessary truth (*pace* Quine) to be captured by philosophy? Can we still maintain that there is a meaning (*pace* not only Quine, but also Austin, Wittgenstein and other sceptics), which can constitute the subject to philosophical analyses? And if these concepts should become endangered species, then what about philosophy?

2. Philosophical Theory?

To answer these questions, let us reconsider the question as to what it is that philosophy is searching out. The roots of the way in which contemporary analytical philosophers would generally answer this question can be traced back to the pioneers of the analytic movement, in particular to the Viennese

logical empiricists. In a programmatic article, Moritz Schlick proposed to distinguish between *the pursuit of truth* (yielding contingent theses "about the world") and *the pursuit of meaning* (yielding necessary interconnections between concepts we use); he identified science with the former and philosophy with the latter (Schlick 1932). In this way, the philosophers of the linguistic turn claimed to have found a new definition of philosophy establishing it as a scientifically respectable enterprise and blocking attempts to decry it as what they considered unscientific metaphysical rubbish; and it is in fact this way of thinking which continues to provide the underlay for the intuitions of the majority of analytical philosophers.

However, proposals such as Schlick's are tricky. Does *the pursuit of meaning* mean the same as *the pursuit of truth about meaning*? It seems that in whichever way we answer this question, we are in trouble. If we do identify *the pursuit of meaning* with *the pursuit of truth about meaning*, then philosophy turns out to be identical with a branch of science, namely empirical semantics; and if we reject the identification, then we are left with the conclusion that philosophy is not to yield truths, which seems to be absurd. In the former case we would in fact have no philosophy at all, while in the latter philosophy would be something mysterious and there could surely be no philosophical *theory*.

Logical positivists do not seem to have realized the full significance of this dilemma; they wished to consider philosophy as a theoretical discipline *par excellence* and so embraced the first answer. Thus Carnap considers meaningful philosophical statements simply as "second-order" contingent truths, as truths about the language in which we formulate the "first-order" truths about the world; philosophy, according to him, is "the logical syntax of the language of science" (Carnap 1934). It would seem to follow from this that philosophy is simply a science, a particular brand of linguistics; but Carnap insists that philosophy, at the very same time, nevertheless constitutes the *foundation* to science.

Carnap's position is thus untenable: we cannot have philosophy both as a theory and, simultaneously, as something fundamental to every theory. Either we must relinquish the theoretical character of philosophy, or we must relinquish its foundational character. This predicament became the central problem for those philosophers of the analytical tradition, most significantly Wittgenstein and Quine, who realized the failure of positivism. These two philosophers chose different ways: Wittgenstein believed that philosophy is in a sense foundational and he realized that in such circumstances it can be neither theoretic, nor systematic; thus he concluded that philosophy must be understood as something as a collection of "therapeutic" hints. Quine, on the

other hand, wanted to uphold the theoretical status of philosophy and saw that consequently he must relinquish the idea of philosophy as fundamental to science. This led him to his rejecting the very idea of a fundament, of a Cartesian *prima philosophia*, and to his considering philosophical theory as a bundle of scientific results marked not by being firmer or more fundamental than the rest of science, but by being relevant for questions which are traditionally considered as philosophical.

However, there might seem to be a third way, a way which allows us to defend Carnap's stance and to have philosophy both as a theoretical, and a foundational discipline. We may hold that philosophy does yield truths, but truths which are firmer than those yielded by science, because they are *analytic*. Under this view, philosophy appears to be a special kind of theory which - in force of the firmness of its truths - is fundamental to every other theory. Seen from this viewpoint, philosophy also appears to coincide with logic, which can be seen as a theoretical account of necessary truth. To illuminate the real nature of this proposal, we must consider the nature of necessary truth.

3 The Nature of Necessary Truth

It seems to be obvious that some true statements merely *happen* to be true, whereas others are true *necessarily*; no matter whether one speaks about *truths of fact* and *truths of reason*, *real* and *verbal truths*, *matters of fact* and *relations of ideas*, *analytic* and *synthetic truths* or *contingent* and *necessary truths*. Statements true in the former way are usually considered to express some kind of junctions of things and they are thought of as made true by things really being joined in the manner they declare them to be; statements true in the latter way are taken to amount to limitations of the joinability of things (where the limitations can again be seen as certain junctions of objects - in this case as everlasting junctions of some "higher-order" objects in a "third realm").

It is this picture which was challenged by Quine in his celebrated *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* (Quine 1951). Quine's point is that the boundary between necessary and contingent truth is not an absolute one, that it is rather a more or less pragmatic matter; that we can never verify a single isolated statement, because it is only whole theories, or at least their nontrivial parts, that ever can be really verified. To be necessary thus, according to him, means to be so interwoven with the "web of our beliefs" that we cannot imagine giving it up without doing the whole web a serious harm.

A similar picture emerges from the enigmatic writings of the late Wittgenstein: necessity is the matter of the rules of the language game being played, of the theory we employ. Such rules are unsurmountable as long as we

are inside of the game, but they appear deliberate as soon as we move outside of it. Thus, Quine's claim, "any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system" (Quine 1963, 43), can be paralleled by Wittgenstein's (1953, p.69) "it is in a sense arbitrary what is called possible and what is not called possible" (Wittgenstein 1953, 69). Rules are in this clear sense arbitrary; and so are analytic truths as articulations of rules. Hence the arbitrariness of what is necessary, and consequently of what is possible.

However, we must be careful not to take this Wittgensteino-Quinean stance in an oversimplified way. To accept a language means to approve some of its sentences as necessarily true. There is no principal need to adopt a particular language (although our native language is in a sense forced upon us and it is just this language which furnished us with our ultimate means of theoretical coping with the world); however, doing theory (in the broadest sense of the word) and engaging oneself in rational argumentation presupposes adoption of a language as an unquestionable basis. Language is a Janus-faced being: its rules, its necessary truths, when seen "from outside", are contingent and deliberate, but when seen "from inside", are necessary and obligatory.

To say that something is necessarily true is not to say anything factual, rather it amounts to (as Ayer, 1936, pointed out) declaring one's conformity with a certain language game, one's willingness to accept a certain language. If I say that *All humans are mortal* is necessarily true, then what I say is that if I encounter an immortal being I am not going to consider it a man. If someone disagrees, then our disagreement cannot be settled by investigation of the world; his disagreement simply means that he is playing a language game different from the one that I am. I can persuade him (for example by showing him some books from which it would follow that my game is the one played by the majority of speakers of English), but I cannot show that he is false in the sense in which I could if, for example, he denied that Bill Clinton is mortal.

Thus it is, indeed, in a sense arbitrary which statements are necessarily true - but only if we view language from outside. Accepting the language as our means of communication - and we need a language all the time - we surrender the possibility of querying its necessary truths, on pain of blurring the boundary between consistency and inconsistency and so losing the firm ground beneath our feet, downgrading language to a bundle of expressive shrieks. However, it is to some extent possible to tamper with necessary truth without breaking down rational communication; and that *language is in fact nothing other than an equilibrium between the stability guaranteeing ongoing understanding and the variability making language into something more than a mere set of symbols.*

Our language can be seen as the stage we set up for the world to make its appearance; necessary truth is our setting up the stage, contingent truths are then the way the world appears. Changing language we change the appearance of the world. However, we must beware of taking this scheme-content way of viewing the language absolutely; the decomposition into a scheme and a content should rather be seen as our way of viewing how language works, as our making sense of the working.

Hence the necessary/contingent boundary can be seen as the matter of the outside observer's way of viewing the game; and one and the same game may be viewed in different ways drawing the boundary at various places. This is the point of the holistic insight of Wittgenstein and Quine. However, there is more to necessary truth than this. Some necessary truths are constitutive to the actual language game; and the explicit adherence to them makes it possible for the speakers to retain the common ground. To play the game is to take these truths as necessary. The necessary truth of such statements is not the mere matter of the outside observer's conclusion with respect to the way they are handled by the speakers; it is the matter of the speaker's *credo*, of their making it explicit that they are willing to accept the language game which is being played.

4 Logic and Philosophy after the Fall of the Dogma

The recognition of the real character of the necessity/contingency opposition as initiated by Wittgenstein and Quine, constitutes a real challenge to logic - logic is to be the pursuit of necessary truth, but does not necessary truth turn out to be something like a mere chimera? However, logic does continue as the summarization of necessary truths - a finite grasp on the infinity of instances of consequences. The difference is only that as necessity turns out to amount not to an ultimate structure of reality, but rather "merely" to the rules of the way we spell out reality, logic turns out to be not the "true canon of the Universe", but rather only the code of our way of theoretizing and our argumentation. Logical truths are necessary not because they reach beyond language into a realm of unchanging and ever-lasting propositions, but because they summarize certain basic relevant patterns of our language on which our overall interaction with the world rests.

What in particular is put into doubt is the atomistic view of the world, which has underpinned our understanding of logic for almost the whole century. Logic keeps us yielding cases for the reduction of truth of some statements to the truth of other statements; and these we can continue to view as amounting to the reduction of more complex facts to simpler ones, or to the reduction of some more advanced pieces of our knowledge to other, more

primitive ones. However, it seems no longer feasible simply to assume that there is an absolute, ultimate basis of elementary statements (or of elementary facts, or of elementary pieces of knowledge) to which all other statements (facts, pieces of knowledge) must be reducible. What counts as elementary from one visual angle can count as complex from another; and there is no absolute viewpoint, no *God's eye view of the Universe as one closed system* (Putnam, 1984, p.27). As Hacking puts it, "logic, depth grammar, structuralism, and the like should postulate points of convergence or condensation, not atoms." (Hacking 1979, 315)

Philosophy can still, in a sense, be understood as *the pursuit of meaning*; but we must not take such a definition as implying that meaning is something absolutely fixed and that the task of philosophy is simply to point it out. We can no longer see necessary truth as something given once and forever by the way our words hook onto the world, and we can no longer claim that the task of philosophy is to discover the true structure of the world beyond all languages and the relationship of words to nodes of this structure. Philosophy is a matter of the critique of the usefulness of the languages we use, it does not result in theories in our common language, but rather at practical hints that are to make us see, to use Austin's popular turn of phrase, how we do things with words, and how else we could do them.

We can imagine that viewed "from Nowhere", "by God's eye", the world can be considered as sheer contingency displaying regularity of only the causal kind; linguistic utterances appearing to be merely peculiar kinds of events obeying the all-encompassing web of causes and effects. But insofar as we are no Gods, each of us has to dwell "within a language", to observe the world through its prism and to perceive some of its God's-eye-view-contingencies as necessities. We have to admit that Heidegger (taken, since Carnap, as the prototypical enemy of an analytical philosopher) was right in stressing that language is not a tool, but rather the way of our existence; that it is the *House of our Being* (Heidegger 1959). Logic and philosophy can be considered as searching out the description of this house established by our language; helping us to figure out its architecture and so to help us feel at home in it.

5. References

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