

## **Truth by Analysis: Games, names and philosophy**

By COLIN MCGINN

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In *Truth by Analysis*, Colin McGinn aims to breath new life into conceptual analysis. He also aims to establish (by conceptual analysis) that philosophy *is* conceptual analysis (104), where the knowledge we acquire by conceptual analysis is inseparable from the means by which we acquire it (144–50).

The claim that philosophy is conceptual analysis is somewhat less radical than it sounds, since under the heading of “conceptual analysis” McGinn (94–100) includes attempts to determine what *category* something belongs to (e.g. physical or mental); to determine whether two things are compatible; to determine whether grasping some specific concept requires that one grasp another; to replace a concept with other concepts; and so on. Indeed, once McGinn has claimed that Nietzsche was conceptually analysing *conventional morality* (102), the reader may well wonder whether *discussing a concept* is supposed to be a sufficient condition for being a conceptual analyst.

Although the official line of the book is that conceptual analysis is a (very) broad church, McGinn mostly focusses on the traditional project of defining concepts by providing necessary and sufficient conditions. There have been many critics of this project, and McGinn rebuts them in chapters 2–6 and 8–9. In what follows, I want to explore one of McGinn’s arguments in some detail: McGinn himself describes the argument as “particularly important” (40), and unpacking it will provide some sense of how McGinn conceives of his project.

Consider Edna, a philosopher in a post-Gettier slump. Edna thinks that truth and belief are necessary conditions for knowledge, but she denies that there is any further condition that:

- (a) is necessary for knowledge; and
- (b) together with truth and belief, suffices for knowledge; and
- (c) does not mention knowledge.

Although it will strike many as reasonable, McGinn argues that “there is an actual *incoherence*” in Edna’s position (40, McGinn’s italics).

Before I assess McGinn’s argument, I should note that its conclusion simply *must* be wrong. Indeed, McGinn ends the book by (unwittingly) admitting as much. McGinn claims that there are “significant non-trivial conceptual truths governing” *instantiation*; for example, that instantiation is “pleonastic”. Pleonasticity is therefore a non-trivial necessary condition for instantiation. However, McGinn also thinks that “no set of non-circular necessary and sufficient conditions” governs *instantiation*

(167–8). In short, McGinn treats *instantiation* just as Edna treats *knowledge*. So, on pain of inconsistency, McGinn cannot dismiss Edna’s position as incoherent.

With that out of the way, here is McGinn’s argument against Edna. Suppose any condition meeting (a) and (b) violates (c), and so has to mention knowledge. Since knowledge entails both truth and belief, this third condition makes it (in some sense) redundant to mention truth and belief; but “how can those conditions [truth and belief] be necessary if they are made redundant by the final conjunct?” (41). *Reductio!*

This argument trades on a pun. In his rhetorical question, McGinn takes “necessary” to mean something like “necessary to mention”. That simply is not what “necessary” means when we are discussing “necessary conditions”. It feels odd to have to point this out in a review of a book about conceptual analysis, but to say that truth is a necessary condition for knowledge is just to say that if *p* is known then *p* is true.

McGinn offers a second gloss on his argument against Edna, as follows: “It would be a bizarre concept that contained itself as a component *as well as* an assortment of necessary conditions!” (41; McGinn’s italics). Again, though, this trades on a strange understanding of “necessary conditions”. We might loosely say “knowledge contains truth”, as a way of expressing that truth is a necessary condition for knowledge (i.e. that if *p* is known, then *p* is true). But in this sense, it is utterly unremarkable that knowledge “contains” both truth and knowledge, since this amounts only to the banality that both truth and knowledge are necessary for knowledge (i.e. that if *p* is known, then *p* is both true and known). Clearly, McGinn must have some *other* notion of containment in mind.

As, indeed, he does. McGinn thinks that knowledge contains truth as a proper *mereological* part (see 4–5, 34–5, 41, 60–1, 79–85, 93–4). One might think that such a claim stands in need of justification, but McGinn writes:

Do we seriously need to defend the proposition that concepts have parts? Why should we? What argument is there against the supposition? As far as we can tell, every domain of inquiry consists of complex objects that divide into parts—chemistry, physics, anatomy, psychology, geometry, arithmetic, and linguistics.... Why suppose that concepts alone are an exception to the rule? Why should concepts be essentially indivisible, universally atomic? (80)

This is the closest McGinn ever comes to defending his mereological view of concepts. But *even if* we accept that “every domain of inquiry consists of complex objects that divide into parts”, notice that bees are not made out of smaller bees (to take a zoological example). So what entitles McGinn to suppose that concepts must be made from other concepts?

Here is an alternative: our concepts arise from our interactions with things in our environments, given our interests, aims, beliefs, and so forth. On this picture, knowledge does not contain truth, except in the banal sense that if *p* is known then *p* is true. (If McGinn must use mereological language here, he can think of a concept’s parts as the things in our environment, our aims, etc.) And, on this picture, it will be

fairly unremarkable if Edna is right and *knowledge* cannot be defined in other terms. But, unfortunately, McGinn never considers alternatives to his own picture.

For such reasons, I am wholly unmoved by McGinn's explicit arguments in defence of the project of defining concepts. However, McGinn also attempts to defend the project by example. He tells us (viii) that his "faith in conceptual analysis" was "restored" by Suits' 1978 analysis of *game*, and he is keen to proselytise:

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. I also offer the following simpler and, so to speak, more portable version of the above: playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles. (Suits 1978: 41, Suits' square-brackets; quoted by McGinn 24)

McGinn states that he searched in vain for counterexamples to Suits' definition (vii). But in fact, Suits' definition is neither necessary nor sufficient for being a game:

*Counterexample to sufficiency.* The goal of mountain climbing is to get to the summit; but a mountain climber would spurn the offer of a helicopter ride to the summit; so mountain climbing involves an unnecessary obstacle. Suits (1978: 84–7) therefore explicitly counts mountain climbing as a game. I find this odd (as does McFee 2004: 25–6), but it gets worse. Exactly parallel reasoning shows that taking a stroll around a lake counts as a game on Suits' analysis. In detail: the goal of taking a stroll around a lake is to get around the lake; but a stroll taker would spurn the offer of a lift around the lake on a passing ice-cream van; so taking a stroll around a lake involves an unnecessary obstacle.

*Counterexample to necessity.* Picture consequences is a surrealist parlour game. To start the game, someone draws a head on a piece of paper (with no one watching); she then folds the paper over to conceal what she has drawn, and passes it to the next participant, who draws a body (with no one watching), folds the paper over and passes it on; and this is repeated until an entire picture has been drawn, whereupon the paper is unfolded and the picture is revealed. Now, if the goal of picture consequences were to draw a surreal picture, then all the concealment would be an "unnecessary obstacle". But that is not the goal of picture consequences: you do not collectively *fail* at picture consequences if, by remarkable happenstance, you collectively draw a Utahraptor's head, torso and legs, thus ending up with a perfectly ordinary picture of a Utahraptor. If it is even appropriate to speak of a "goal" here, there are really only two candidates:

- (1) to draw a picture collectively; in which case it is no obstacle that you cannot see what the others have drawn (cf. Suits 1978: 55).
- (2) to draw a picture collectively but in mutual ignorance; in which case concealment is *required*, rather than an unnecessary obstacle.

Either way, picture consequences fails to count as a game, according to Suits' analysis.

In short, McGinn's favoured analysis of *game* is deeply flawed. I have already discussed McGinn's purported analysis of *philosophy* (as conceptual analysis). So let me close by discussing the third analysandum mentioned in the subtitle of McGinn's book: *name*. McGinn analyses personal names like "Plato" as "the person with the body at the origin of that [Kripkean] causal chain" (111–6). This analysis is wrong, quite generally:

*Counterexample.* Dave actually first heard about Plato from his teacher, Holly. But consider a possible world, *w*, where Plato exists but where Holly never teaches Dave. The causal chain that actually introduced Dave to the name "Plato" does not exist in *w*, so McGinn's account tells us that Dave's (actual) word "Plato" fails to pick out Plato in world *w*. Dave's (actual) word "Plato" therefore does not rigidly designate Plato, on McGinn's account.

In sum, McGinn does not look hard enough for counterexamples to his favoured analyses (cf. 20n7), and so fails to play the game of defining concepts particularly well.

Of course, this raises an important question: *can* that game be played well, or at all? Sadly, *Truth by Analysis* makes little progress on that question. McGinn fails to defend conceptual analysis, either in principle or by example.<sup>1</sup>

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