

Mind, World and Action

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Remarks on Williamson's *The Philosophy of Philosophy*

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- One of the main themes of *The Philosophy of Philosophy* is the view that, even though philosophy is an armchair activity, it would be wrong to conclude that philosophical questions are basically conceptual (analogy with mathematics).

- Philosophical truths are by and large neither about words nor concepts; and it holds generally for analytic truths too.

- Sentences like “Vixens are female foxes” (or “Zzz is a short sleep”) are no exceptions.
- Such statements are not, as someone might except, second-order concept-defining/determining or about extensionally equivalent concepts, nor are they pragmatic ways of establishing stipulative synonymy.

- They are first-order statements concerning worldly objects: vixens and female foxes (respectively zzzs and short sleeps).

- This is not to deny that the terms “vixen” or “zzz” have been introduced by stipulation, or that the extensions of the concepts “vixen” and “female fox” are identical; this is just to say that the sentence “Vixens are female foxes” is not *about* words or concepts – it is about vixens.

- Even though “vixen” might be introduced to mean female fox by stipulation, it is not the case that stipulation is what makes vixens to be female foxes.

- Williamson is criticizing the view according to which analytic truths are those that are true solely in virtue of meaning (without the need to verify if things are as the meaning requires). He is following Boghossian in endorsing the idea that, even in such cases, we could not possibly dismiss the following explanation:

For any true sentence s whatsoever, a canonical explanation of the truth of s takes the overall form “ s means that P , and P ”.

To use the obscure locution “in virtue of”, every true sentence is true in virtue of both its meaning and how things are.

(Williamson, T., *Philosophy of Philosophy*, p. 59; citation from

Bhogossian, P.A., 1997, *Analyticity*, p.335-6)

- In asking in virtue of what vixens are female foxes Williamson rejects any demand to look at the semantic debate about the word “vixen”, or “fox” or “female” with the goal to answer such question.
- That vixens are female foxes is hence not a pragmatic way of saying that “vixen” applies to female foxes in the same way in which “zzz” applies to short sleeps.

Instead, what is being endorsed is that

Vixens would have been female foxes no matter how we had used

words. Presumably, vixens are female foxes in virtue of whatever

female foxes are female foxes in virtue of; what makes it the case

that vixens are female foxes is whatever makes it the case that

female foxes are female foxes.

(Williamson, T., *The Philosophy of Philosophy*)

- What is the epistemic status of such sentence? How do we know that vixens are female foxes?
- Might its being about worldly objects imply its aposteriority? Does it imply that vixens being female foxes has been empirically determined?
- Here is why one might be tempted in this direction.

- What is given for the target sentence is its first-order reading only. That makes the analytic-synthetic continuity being established. And given that the sentence is hence not about words, concepts, nor their extensions, but concerns physical objects instead, one might regard it to be implicitly analogous to other sentences concerning physical objects.

- Being the sentence about earthlings – vixens in this case, we might be tempted to think that its being true has been empirically determined and is therefore empirically knowable.

- In this case the sentence would be epistemically analogous to paradigms of aposteriority such as, e.g. “Hesperus is Phosphorus”.
- And in this case, the epistemic status of vixens being female foxes would be like the status of empirical facts; in our Hesperus example dependent upon the astronomic discovery of the Morning and the Evening star being the same star.

- Such a result would deny to a traditional paradigm of analyticity the status of being a priori and might even cast doubt on its being analytic (through not being a priori).

So what?

- A Quinean might not consider it to be a bad consequence,
“Vixens are female foxes”
being likened to
paradigms of syntheticity.

What could nevertheless force us to reject the idea of such an analogy?

- Well, if anything, the metasemantics of these two cases is different: “vixen” being stipulatively defined as female fox, while Hesperus being empirically determined to be identical to Phosphorus.

- How and why “vixen” means female fox (or “zzz” a short sleep for that matter) is due to stipulation, explicit or implicit.

- According to W., the way in which it came to be the case that “vixen” means female fox, is of no semantic concern, since the act of stipulation or any other way of obtaining the mentioned fact is of no concern for the semantic theory that is interested only in the outcome.

- Stipulation, since that is what we think it is the case in the examples of “vixen” or “zzz”, is what *metasemantic* analysis deals with.

- Semantics facts are facts of the kind we attempt to systematize in giving a systematic compositional semantic theory for a language, facts as to what its expressions mean. Metasemantic facts are the nonsemantic facts on which the semantics facts supervene. ... The semantic theory takes no notice of the act of stipulation, only of its outcome - that a given expression has a given meaning.

(Williamson, T., *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, pp.71-72)

- Even so, metasemantics is having a role in determining the a priority of statements.
- Just remember Kripke's famous example from *Naming and Necessity* "I'm giving a talk today" in which an un-contentiously a posteriori statement might be treated as being a priori – due to its metasemantics.

- Metasemantic considerations very probably could either involve or ground the epistemic ones. So why would metasemantic facts be considered irrelevant for the epistemic status in question?

- If this is accepted, then the vixen case - being metasemantically a stipulative definition - could not possibly be an empirically determined fact. It would be a priori and presumably analytic.

- This option is however just one horn of the dilemma we are faced with when asking how we know that vixens are female foxes.
- Declining this option would lead us to the other horn of the dilemma.

- On this horn, even though the sentence is about earthlings (instead of concepts, words or abstract objects or any other causally inert objects) it does not imply its aposteriority; we might know that vixens are female foxes without having to check that out empirically.

- The vixen case, on this horn, turns out not to be analogous to the morning star-evening star case and vixens being female foxes turns out as not being empirically established.

- In that case, epistemic analyticity is what plays the epistemic role. On this reading though, Williamson's view about the acceptability of the epistemological conception of analyticity and the analytic theory of apriority would have to follow the line of reasoning endorsed by Boghossian.

- But Williamson is explicitly denying it and arguments in favor of such denial has been offered (*Phil. Of Phil*), e.g. the failure of the understanding-assent link even for the paradigm cases of analyticity.

- But if no understading-assent link holds, that is if we reject epistemic analyticity, how do we know that vixens are female foxes?
- The question seems to remain open.

More about the understanding- assent link...

- Williamson shows the attempt to develop both a metaphysical and an epistemological account of analyticity to be resolved in the negative.

- In rejecting the epistemological notion of analyticity, Williamson's focus is on showing the failure of the understanding-assent links even for paradigms of "analyticity".
- The analyzed examples comprise, among others, elementary logical truths.

- One of the reasons for the general failure of the understading-assent link is the possibility of having a linguistically competent speaker, who does not lack semantic understanding; even so, due to some rather unusual or even awkward beliefs/views of theirs or to their possible lack of logical understanding, the result is the lack of assent to statements that they nevertheless understand.

- The result is particularly odd when the analyzed cases are statement such as e.g. “No three-year-old child is an adult” or elementary logical truths such as, e.g. “Every vixen is a vixen”.

- How do Williamson's reasons for rejecting the epistemological notion of analyticity (failure of the understanding-assent links) differ from Quine's view that any assertion is open to revision?

- Is his rejecting the understanding-assent link partly following the same line of reasoning as Quine's famous argument for the indeterminacy of meaning (as a reason for denying the notion of analyticity)?

- Remembering Williamson's examples of eccentric believers who reject widely accepted statements linked to the concepts debated, one might be reminded of Quine's revisionary tactics.

- Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustment elsewhere in the system ...
... no statement is immune to revision

(Quine, Two Dogmas of Empiricism, in *From a Logical Point of View*, p.43)

- In which sense does Williamson's reasons for rejecting the understanding-assent link, and hence the notion of epistemological analyticity differ from Quine's view on the indeterminacy of meaning encapsulated in this quote?

- Could the linguistically-competent-speaker's reasons for not assenting even to the paradigms of analyticity not be treated as caused by "drastic adjustment elsewhere in the system" with respect to the traditionally set of beliefs that make the understanding-assent link cogent?

Skeptical argument in probabilistic terms

- Williamson is developing his reconstruction of the skeptical argument in probabilistic terms.

- *SS* - the skeptic's scenario, in which "it falsely appears that there are mountains in Switzerland"
- *s* - the statement that mountains are metaphysically impossible
- The initial premise in the skeptical argument is $P(\neg s / \neg A \neg s) = 1$, i.e.
the probability that mountains are metaphysically possible, given that it does not *Appear* so is equal to 1.

The probability relevant here is

- a kind of evidential epistemic probability intermediate between subjective and objective extremes
(Williamson, T., *The Phil. of Phil.*, p.228)

- The answer to the skeptical argument offered by W. is disjunctivist in its spirit, consisting in the introduction of two kinds of evidences: in the good case scenario (mountains are metaphysically possible - $\neg s$) the evidence is the existence of mountains itself, in the bad case scenario (mountains are metaphysically impossible - s) mountains just appear to be when in fact they do not exist.

- The skeptic reasoning is supposed to persuade the thinker himself.
Therefore, when successful, it should involve thinker's acceptance of the first premise in its entirety.

- But thus read, is the first premise not of the Moore paradoxical form?
- The first premise can be read as:
Mountains are metaphysically possible,
given that it does not appear
mountains to be metaphysically
possible.
- Is it not reducible to the form
“ $\neg s$ and it does not appear that $\neg s$ ”?

- But this form is tantamount to
“ p and I do not believe that p ”

(I am taking appearance and belief to
be interchangeable in the context)

- If the premise does saddle us with the paradox, one might ask the following:

Why has the line of refusal of the skeptical argument been shifted from denying the first premise of the argument to the introduction of reference duality?