In Defense of the Method of Cases

In this essay I argue that 'intuitions' and 'the method of cases' are crucial to informative 'conceptual analyses' in analytic philosophy. I argue that 'case studies,' in the form of thought experiments, play a decisive role in evaluating a philosophical theory. In contrast, experimental philosophers have objected to the method of cases, on grounds that the verdicts of various case studies when presented to laypersons, lead to diverse verdicts. These verdicts are sometimes based upon irrelevant factors such as cultural background, order of case presentation, affective content, and heritable personality traits. In "Experimental Philosophy and the Method of Cases" (2021) Horvath and Koch present the current status of the experimental challenge. These authors conclude that arguments and empirical evidence supporting the 'method of cases' and the 'expertise defense' are unconvincing. They state that the burden of proof still lies upon philosophers supporting the method of cases. I respond to this challenge with the use of intuitions, conceptual analysis, and definitions, to defend the method of cases with an 'expertise defense' as the proper methodology for a social scientific analytic philosophy.

Introduction

In the first section, I present a sketch of what I believe 'analytic philosophy' is. In the second section, I address issues discussed by Joachim Horvath and Steffen Koch (2021). In particular, I respond to their rejection of the 'expertise defense.' I argue against experimental philosophers who claim that since intuitive verdicts about hypothetical cases are unreliable, the method of cases should be curtailed or abandoned. Although I agree that many 'expert verdicts' are 'errant,' this shouldn't lead us to abandon the use of case studies to analyze concepts and their definitions.

I. Concepts, Intuitions, Definitions, and Conceptual Analysis

On the view of analytic philosophy as presented here, what distinguishes empirical physical science from analytic philosophy, is philosophy's reliance on personal intuitions. Intuitions are the starting point for a philosophical theory. An 'intuition' is a kind of belief. Intuitions differ from empirical beliefs because they prominently involve an *interpretation* of *the way things are* and initially are *non-inferential* (i.e., without conscious explicit reasons). 'Intuitions' are evidential data to be explained by a theory. Both a person's 'worldview' and 'linguistic' intuitions play a role in conceptual analyses.

Intuitions are not reliably produced perceptions (i.e., empirical beliefs), and thus are not capable of being independently (objectively) tested. Analytic philosophy is characterized by its not-always-reliable intuitions (as beliefs) as the grounding-point (or starting-point) for evaluating philosophical theories. Intuitions are the initial, and in the end, the final, reflective data from which a theory is evaluated. Theories are generated from the conjunction of *questions* asked, *concepts* adopted, and *background beliefs* assumed. The goal of a substantive theory is to transform a person's non-inferential 'intuitions' (i.e., *seeming* to be the case) into more strongly confirmed beliefs; or otherwise dispel a person's initial false intuitions and replace them with new beliefs.

What Kinds of Concepts Are There?

A concept is a *functional physical entity* that is found in sentient creatures that in humans can be *expressed* (i.e., defined, explained) by *words and sentences* (i.e., linguistic entities). Concepts are not empirical beliefs; they have a different form of function than beliefs. Concepts function to categorize entities. Persons possess 'mental representations'

of 'categories' with associated thoughts (or tacit beliefs) about what a concept (or word) is about. The explicit definition of the content of a given concept is the same across individuals to the extent that individuals have similar (or identical) characteristic properties in mind for items that fall under that concept. In sum, concepts are sub-propositional psychological entities that with extended thought, can be described or stipulated in detail with language.

What *kinds* of concepts are there? Let us hypothesize six kinds:

(1) *Natural kind concepts* are about natural kind entities. A natural kind entity is thought to have intrinsic properties (and/or extrinsic properties) with an independent nature. 'Water,' 'electron,' 'knowledge,' and 'truth' are examples.

(2) *Group resemblance concepts* are about entities (or things) that have a superficial resemblance or loose similarity; but may not have a set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions that defines the entity as a kind. These nouns, predicates, verbs, and adjectives are sometimes called 'cluster concepts.' These concepts, represented by terms, may be subject to precise descriptive characterizations or precise disjunctive definitions about their reported use. 'Game,' 'friend,' 'flat,' 'democracy,' and 'art' (most concepts) are examples.

(3) *Fixed definiens concepts* have two features that make up their uniqueness: (a) a fixed definiens concept is a term that is stipulatively defined to *unequivocally identify* any item(s) that fall under its definition, and (b) a fixed definiens concept is stable and not subject to alteration, without creating a new concept. 'Bachelor,' 'not,' 'equator,' as well as 'square,' 'limit,' and 'successor' are examples.

(4) *Fictional entity concepts* are about entities created (or brought into existence) at a certain time through the acts of an author or storyteller. We accept that we can talk about fictional entities to account for the truth of various intuitively true sentences that purportedly refer to fictional things. 'Santa Claus' is an example.

(5) *Definite description concepts* are phrases used to designate, denote, or specify certain entities that may or may not exist (or may be fictional). For example, the concept of 'the first man on the moon' designates Neil Armstrong. The concept of 'the first person on Mars' designates nothing.

(6) *Proper name concepts* are understood to designate or denote particular existing or fictional entities (when used in a context). A proper name is normally used in a context where a listener can infer the speaker's intended denotation. The same proper name can designate different entities in different contexts. Some entities have more than one proper name.

There is no 'standard view' of concepts, but these six kinds of concepts should be familiar. Modern philosophers have alluded to them; Quine and 'natural kind' concepts, Wittgenstein and 'group resemblance' concepts, Frege and 'fixed definiens' concepts, and Russell's 'definite descriptions' and 'proper names.' Understanding their structure and function is informative in helping us solve various questions. The term 'concept' as conceived here, represents a 'group resemblance concept.'

Against this view of 'six kinds' of concepts, is a 'received view' that concepts are of 'one kind.' Defenses of the 'one kind' view typically feature abstract metaphysical presuppositions, a respect for physicalism, adherence to formal semantics (including

compositionality), and a respect for cognitive science as a means for answering questions about what concepts are and what they do. Samuel Taylor and Gottfried Vosgerau (2021) state that the 'received view' assumes that *all concepts* have a number of properties in common: they all store *a single kind of information*, they all have the *same functional properties*, and they are all acquired by the *same type of learning process*. On this view, a theory of concepts aims to describe these properties and so to account for the formation and application of concepts. *Concepts are of one kind—the kind CONCEPT—*and they explain the properties of our higher cognitive competencies; that is, the properties of higher cognition that are operative in cognitive tasks such as categorization, meaning extraction, and inductive and deductive reasoning (pp. 1045-46, italics added).

Whether the 'six kinds' or the 'one kind' theory is best, is open to debate.

World-View Intuitions

World-view intuitions are a person's beliefs about the overall character of a phenomenon (or domain) being discussed. 'Worldview intuitions' are intuitions about everything, including linguistic intuitions, and intuitions about human psychology and behavior (e.g., if a choice was available, most persons prefer to be freely given a $1000 bill instead of a $1 bill, to maximize utility). For philosophers, worldview intuitions include beliefs about theism, evolution theory, empiricism, naturalism, semantic theory, possible-worlds realism, mathematics, metaethics, aesthetics, and the practice of philosophy. A philosopher's worldview intuitions are found in the preface, introduction, and abstracts of their published works. There it is stated (1) what questions are important and require answers, (2) what distinctions and associated concepts are useful, and (3) the

viewpoint to be articulated and defended. E.J. Lowe (2000) correctly maintains that one's 'personal metaphysics' about 'reality' is unavoidable for any rational thinker including physical scientists (p. 5).   One's 'personal metaphysics' is one's worldview.

Linguistic Intuitions

Linguistic intuitions are narrower in scope and are about the proper application and use of particular concepts and sentences. Linguistic intuitions are a subset of a person's worldview intuitions. Linguistic intuitions are beliefs about the use of concepts and sentence meaning. A person's possessing a concept makes one disposed to have beliefs (or intuitions) about the correct application of a concept in various cases. A conceptual analysis is the practice of analyzing terms (e.g., knowledge, justification, truth, reference, beauty, number) by exploring the normal uses of terms and sentences and the intentions behind them that give a concept a significance (or meaning, intelligibility) in a context

What Kinds of Definitions Are There?

A 'definition' is a sentence that connects a mark or sound (i.e., a definiendum) to a meaningful definiens. What *kinds* of definitions are there? Let's hypothesize three kinds:

1) A **'reportive definition'** (or 'lexical definition,' 'nominal definition') reports or describes the generally accepted or community equivalence between a definiendum and a definiens. A reportive definition is correct (i.e., true) if its definiens is an accurate report of the usual sense(s) of a definiendum. A standard dictionary contains reportive definitions.

2) A **'theoretic definition'** (or 'real definition,' 'natural definition,') affirms the standard equivalence between a definiendum and a definiens, but represents an attempt to analyze the 'nature' or 'associated material conditions' of the entity being discussed. Entities designated by a theoretic definition are assumed to have a self-unity, or an independent nature that allows them to have essential properties to be the subject of analysis. In physical science, objects such as water, acid, gold, kinetic energy, mass, electron, gene, protein, and enzyme are thought to belong to 'natural kind' categories. In Philosophy, the concepts of knowledge, truth, justification, mentality, cause, law, necessity, identity, number, explanation, freedom, beauty, goodness, justice, and existence have been treated as having an objective nature. A theoretic definition is correct (i.e., true) if its definiens truly describes instances (i.e., extensions) of the object defined. Attention to evidence, reasons, and arguments is required to establish the truth of a theoretic definition.

3) A **'stipulative definition'** introduces a specialized definiens for a definiendum. This occurs in the following three contexts: (a) the initial naming of an entity where the entity is newly-discovered, newly-introduced, newly-created, or newly-renamed, or (b) in the notational abbreviation of one linguistic expression for another (meaningful) linguistic expression, or (c) in a precise formalization where a reportive definiendum-to-definiens relation is generally affirmed but a definiens alteration (or explication) is proposed for pragmatic, technical, or personal reasons.

The evidential support for the tripartite theory of definition is based upon the observations of speech and writing patterns found in natural and artificial languages. The theory should account for definitions that are found in the physical sciences, mathematics, and elsewhere. All other kinds of definitions (e.g., analytic, ostensive, real, nominal, synonymous, recursive, explicit, implicit, precising, persuasive, operational, essential, disjunctive, verbal, etc.) should be identical to, fall under, be explainable, or refutable under these three primary types. The tripartite theory is a hypothesis about the actual limits (and modes) of how persons can specify their use of a linguistic symbol.

P.T. Geach (1976) similarly recognizes a difference between *real* (i.e., theoretic), *nominal* (i.e., reportive), and *proposed* (i.e., stipulative) definitions. In the following text, Geach summarizes his intuitions about the concept of definition (pp. 41-42):

It has long been traditional to distinguish between *real* and *nominal* definitions. (1) Real definitions aim at marking out a class of things that shall correspond to a natural kind, like gold or acids… We need, then, to recognize the natural kinds of things, and to conceptualize this recognition in a form of words describing a given kind: such is the real definition, which naturally scientists keep on updating.

(2) Nominal definition on the contrary is concerned with the use of a term. One sort of nominal definition accepts established usage, and is concerned to sort out and characterize as accurately as possible the actual uses of a word; this is the sort of definition you find in a good dictionary—though dictionaries will also contain a certain number of what would count as real definitions.

(3) Another sort of nominal definition does not merely accept whatever happens to be the current usage, but constitutes a proposal for tightening up the use of a term; under the proposal, the term would mostly be applied as it now is, but with stricter criteria; or again, the proponent of the definition may suggest that we abandon some current uses and retain only one preferred use.

In sum, similar to Geach, Irving Copi (1953, 1956, 2005), and Patrick Hurley (2009) I hypothesize the following disjunctive definition for the concept of 'definition' when understanding this concept as a 'natural kind' entity:

x is a '**definition**' in a definiendum-to-definiens relationship if and only if it is

(1) reportive, or

(2) theoretic, or

(3) stipulative;

(3a) an initial naming assertion, or (3b) an abbreviation, or (3c) a precise formalization for practical, technical, or personal reasons.[1]

This tripartite definition is either *true* or *false* as a description of the nature and material conditions of the concept of 'definition.' This tripartite theory is a social scientific conceptual truth, which if false, could be disproved by counterexample(s). The challenge for a skeptic is to provide a single counterexample.

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[1] Rudolf Carnap (1956) referred to this kind of 3c definition as an 'explication,' where a *stipulated refinement* of a term (or imprecise concept) is proposed for more precise theories (p. 8).

The Explanatory Strategy of Conceptual Analysis

Conceptual analyses attempt to describe our linguistic practices and intentions and interpret various natural (and artificial) language uses of sentences and words. Conceptual analyses involve clarifying, resolving ambiguities, and promoting consistency. Conceptual analysis centers upon the evaluation of competing philosophical theories using best-explanation inferences. Analyses often include functional explanations and hypotheses about how language is used and the intentions of particular users. Functional explanations provide a theory of a person's reasons, assumptions, and goals for making an assertion. Many times, a concept is defined (or explained) in part as a response to imagined hypothetical situations (i.e., the method of cases). Participants in a discussion critically assess their linguistic and worldview intuitions about case studies (e.g., 'Tom Grabit' and 'Henry and the Barn'). It is verdicts about concrete cases that are given the primary weight by the standard justificatory procedure of conceptual analysis. Rejecting or modifying beliefs and theses in the face of convincing examples and counterexamples is a characteristic of philosophical argumentation. Being critical of one's own and others' intuitions helps resolve questions and puzzles.

The 'Expertise Defense' in Evaluating Case Studies

The methodology of analytic philosophy *should* be that of an abductive 'social science' whereby hypotheses are sought to explain beliefs and behaviors by rendering them intelligible and by explaining human action. A philosopher's interest should be in developing a lay reader's conceptual and linguistic competence that allows for a better understanding of a 'natural world' that includes the beliefs, desires, values, and intentions

of persons in it. Analyses should assist in the development of true beliefs about core issues in epistemology, ethics, mathematics, aesthetics, and language (e.g., about 'concepts' and 'definition').

Who is best suited to lead a conceptual analysis? Not surprisingly, it is argued here that conceptual analysis is best led by analytic philosophers who have thought long and hard about certain questions related to the use (or meaning) of a certain concept. Philosophers tend to have an explicit (or implicit) systematic theory (or hypothesis) for how words are used and how beliefs and knowledge are obtained. Alvin Goldman (2007) argues that conceptual investigation is a proto-scientific, quasi-experimental enterprise, where the aim is to reveal the contents of category-representing states as a starting point for seeking a derivative public concept. He states that the best way to understand one's personal psychological conception of a given concept is to contrast it with other conceptions found in 'analyses' led by experts. We systemize our intuitions and test them against other intuitions. A philosopher must be cautious about whether the proper use and applicability of a given concept is (universally) the same for all people; but it is assumed that there is a strong degree of similarity. (Goldman, pp. 17-20).

II. Recent Challenges to the Expertise Defense.

In "Experimental Philosophy and the Method of Cases," Horvath and Koch argue that 'the method of cases' and 'expertise defense' are undermined by empirical studies that show that irrelevant factors (e.g., order of presentation, cultural background) can influence **S**'s 'verdict' about a hypothetical case. They recite findings that show that professional philosophers as well as laypersons, can be influenced by extraneous factors.

Available empirical data does not support the claim that philosophers possess relevant expertise in their intuitive judgments about cases. With experimental studies, it is shown that the intuitive verdicts of experts are 'untrustworthy' or an 'unreliable indicator' of an ordinary person's intuitions about a case. Let's paraphrase the authors:

> The most popular response to the experimental challenge is the *expertise defense*, which is based on the assumption that professional philosophers are experts in their areas of specialization. Problematic results about lay people's intuitive judgments would thus be largely irrelevant to philosophical practice, because philosophical experts can be expected to better withstand the influence of irrelevant factors. Given that most studies in experimental philosophy have been conducted with lay subjects, the expertise defense would entitle professional philosophers to ignore the relevant findings.

Horvath and Koch state that the response that philosophers are 'experts' is neither in question, *nor is it enough* for the expertise defense to succeed:

> Rather, philosophers must have a specific intuitive expertise for judging hypothetical cases in their respective areas of specialization, of a kind that would make them more resistant to the influence of irrelevant factors. To rebut the experimental restrictionist challenge, the claimed advantage of philosophical experts would have to be sufficiently clear and pronounced.

Against the expertise defense, Horvath and Koch claim, are recent empirical studies that show both *lay persons* and *philosophers* are susceptible to 'order presentation,' 'heritable personality traits,' and 'irrelevant options' when presented various case studies involving

'free will,' Nozick's experience-machine scenario, and the trolley-dilemma. They argue that an 'immunity model' which claims that philosophers are better at resisting the influence of irrelevant factors, isn't supported by available evidence.

A Response to the Experimental Challenge

Experimental philosophers have argued that since intuitive verdicts about hypothetical cases are unreliable, the method of cases should be curtailed or abandoned.

The first reply to experimental philosophers is to acknowledge that 'intuitions' of both *lay persons* and *philosophers* aren't in any sense 'neutral' or 'reliable.' The method of cases is based upon not-always-reliable intuitions (as beliefs) as the grounding-point (or starting-point) for evaluating philosophical theories.

The second point is related to the first. We should allow that that there are 'experts' in philosophy, only in the sense that some practitioners are *familiar* with given philosophical problems and issues. We can emphatically deny that an 'expert opinion' on a case study (or an issue) translates into a reliability-produced truth-conducive answer. Philosophers have no specific 'intuitive expertise' for judging hypothetical cases. That there exist strong contemporary debates about 'realism' versus 'anti-realism' in metaethics, mathematics, and aesthetics, as well as diverse views in epistemology and the philosophy of language; the claim that expert opinion verdicts are truth-conducive, isn't sustainable. The best indication of the truth of a given conceptual-linguistic analysis is to be found in its appeal to persons who are well-informed but not strongly committed (or biased) toward a theoretic position. Although it isn't possible for persons to have an unbiased worldview, a willingness to openly examine alternative worldviews is a virtue.

A third reply is that the influence of 'irrelevant factors' in judging case studies is of relatively little importance. Of much greater concern is that since a theory cannot be constructed solely out of unbiased and neutral world view intuitions, an analytic philosopher must try to provide a theory with hypotheses and examples that support that a given worldview is true. Philosophers practicing conceptual analysis and the method of cases, don't seek to just measure intuitions (i.e., existing beliefs) and theorize around that; but instead, they try to make more precise linguistic and conceptual intuitions as part of a theory to support or undermine a given worldview. That irrelevant factors can distort case study verdicts among lay persons and philosophers is a problem, but it has been exaggerated and overblown as a reason to give up the method of cases.

A fourth reply to experimental philosophers who claim that diversity in case study verdicts is a reason to discard them, is to consider that in some cases, divided intuitions are the result of false philosophical theories. Saul Kripke's (1980) Godel case study is the subject of concern for Machery, Mallon, Nichols, & Stich (MMNS, 2004, 2009). With the Godel case, MMNS surveyed various populations of ordinary language users and asked them: When John uses the name 'Godel,' is he talking about: (A) the person who really discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic or (B) the person who got hold of the manuscript and claimed credit for the work? Behind the Godel case study is the supposition that the responses of ordinary lay persons will have a bearing on whether a 'descriptivist' or a 'causal theory' of proper name reference is true. But what if these two 'semantic theories' are *false*, and a 'speaker theory' of proper name reference were true? The diversity of verdicts in experimental studies of this case isn't explained as persons

having different intuitions about the semantic reference of proper names, it is explained by the fact that they have no intuitions about semantic reference.[2] That the Godel case experimental studies resulted in mixed responses, doesn't undermine the method of cases.

Conclusion

The method of cases is defended here with an 'expertise defense.' Conceptual analyses are best led by philosophers who have familiarity with existing problems and issues, and perhaps, have new ideas in defending a worldview. The views stated here, of course require much more elaboration. But it can be concluded that the purpose of 'conceptual analysis' and 'case studies' is to defend a worldview theory (e.g., realism, anti-realism, etc.) with an explanation of the linguistic intuitions that support the theory.

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[2] Ludwig (2007) says that it is a misguided assumption that survey responses are expressions of *semantic* intuitions; "all the surveys show is that philosophically untutored subjects do not all give the same responses to the scenarios involving the reference of proper names..." (p. 152). The ambiguity of Mallon *et al.'s* experiment is emphasized by Deutsch (2009). Deutsch says that perhaps "… John intends to be referring to the man who really discovered the incompleteness when he uses 'Godel.' It seems safe to suppose that some… reactions were pragmatically driven intuitions about speaker's reference. At very least, there is no reason to think that all of Mallon *et al.*'s respondents' reactions were semantically driven intuitions about semantic reference" (pp. 456-457).

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