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# Conceptual Truth Defended

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## 1. Scenario-Based Reasoning as Conceptual Analysis

Philosophers often rely on hypothetical scenarios to establish claims about causation, consciousness, knowledge, and the like. Consider e.g. this line of thought:

- (1) Knowledge is not justified true belief. Just contemplate the scenarios Gettier (1963) puts forth. In the situations Gettier describes, we find a protagonist having a true justified belief that  $p$  – but he still does not know that  $p$ .

This is a paradigmatic instance of what I call *scenario-based reasoning*. In (1), Gettier's scenarios are brought up to justify a claim about knowledge. Contemplating the situations Gettier describes is taken to somehow show, first, that this holds true:

- (2) Someone could be in a Gettier-style situation.

Contemplating the Gettier-cases is, secondly, assumed to establish a rather substantial counterfactual conditional, to wit:

- (3) If someone were in a Gettier-style situation, she would have justified true belief, but she would still lack knowledge.

Since (2) and (3) entail that someone could have justified true belief but no knowledge, we may conclude that knowledge cannot be justified true belief. In much the same vein, Davidson (1987, 47) devises his swampman-scenario to convince us that historical properties are essential for meaning, and Searle (1984) intends his story of the Chinese room to make us see that understanding is not reducible to symbol-manipulation.<sup>1</sup>

Scenario-based reasoning bears all the marks of an a priori procedure, or so it seems. Our entitlement (if any) to hold (3) on the basis of contemplating Gettier's cases does not seem to be grounded in experience. (3) seems subject neither to empirical support nor to empirical refutation. By contrast, our entitlement to believe counterfactuals such

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<sup>1</sup> For a somewhat different take on thought experiments, see Häggqvist, this volume.

as the following arguably relies on empirical information, and they are typically taken to be empirically supported and subject to empirical refutation:

- (4) If Novikov were to wrestle a full-grown polar bear, he (Novikov, that is) would lose.

Since the scenario-based reasoning we find in philosophy pivots on a priori counterfactuals such as (3), rather than on mundane counterfactual such as (4), we seem warranted to class philosophical scenario-based reasoning as a priori. This leads to an intriguing question: Why should we agree that contemplating Gettier's scenario provides a priori justification? More precisely, why should reflection on scenarios be a reliable means to establish philosophically significant counterfactuals, and thus provide an a priori entitlement to hold the likes of (3)? Because, or so I maintain, what we do in reflecting on scenarios such as Gettier's cases is to consider whether our concepts apply to the protagonists in the circumstances described. That is to say, I hold that contemplating scenarios is a dependable way to procure a priori entitlement for believing the likes of (3) because the following holds true:

**(CON)** Contemplating scenarios such as the Gettier cases, Davidson's swampman etc. is a variety of conceptual analysis suited to yield a priori knowledge of conceptual (or analytic<sup>2</sup>) truths – conceptual knowledge, for short.

The variety of conceptual analysis I here embrace is thoroughly Gricean in spirit. What we are concerned with in conceptual analysis is *what our terms mean* (see Grice 1958, 175 and Jackson 1998, 33f). In conceptually analysing an expression such as 'knowledge', we aim for an illuminating general characterization of the conditions under which it – or rather, the predicate '*x* knows that *y*' – applies across possible situations. So we contemplate possible cases until we come up with an analysis of the form "*A* knows that *p* iff  $\Phi$ " where the right hand side makes explicit the conditions implicitly guiding our application of 'knows' all along.

I believe that Gricean conceptual analysis offers a powerful account of what we do in scenario-based reasoning, what the business of philosophers is, and why a priori philosophy needs neither non-natural objects, nor a mysterious epistemic intuition (see Bealer 2002, §1.1). In this paper, however, I will focus on defending (CON) from objections aiming to show that it, and the meta-philosophy that comes with it, is a manifest non-starter.

Let me quickly reply to some prominent objections. First, there is no doubt that the conditions implicitly guiding the application of our terms typically aren't *Socratic* – i.e., they cannot well be captured by a tidy conjunction of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. But nothing commits a Gricean analysis to Socratic analysanda. It aims for an illuminating general characterisation of a term's application conditions,

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<sup>2</sup> I take 'conceptual truth' and 'analytic truth' to be mere stylistic variants.

however complex and untidy those might turn out to be. Arguing that conceptual analysis is an ill-fated enterprise since it seeks Socratic analysanda which aren't to be had, as Kornblith (2007, 41ff) and Ramsey (1998, 165) do, amounts to failing to engage with Gricean analysis in the first place.

Secondly, Rudder-Baker (2001, 382ff) argues that conceptual analysis cannot be an a priori enterprise. On the one hand, she objects that an analysis such as “Water is the transparent, drinkable liquid that falls from the sky (etc.)” cannot be a priori since it entails the empirical “Something falls from the sky”. However, Rudder-Baker here erroneously assumes that the ‘water’-sentence wears its logical form on its sleeves, and fails to appreciate that it abbreviates a biconditional such as:

- (6) If something is the transparent, drinkable liquid that falls from the sky (etc.), then it is water, *and* if something is water, then it is the transparent, drinkable liquid that falls from the sky (etc.)

Imagine someone arguing that “Bachelors are unmarried men” cannot be a priori since it entails the empirical “There are unmarried men”<sup>3</sup>. She, too, would fail to appreciate that the ‘bachelor’-sentence is a mere shorthand for the quantified conditional “ $\forall x(x \text{ is a bachelor} \rightarrow x \text{ is an unmarried man})$ ”.

On the other hand, Rudder-Baker argues that knowledge of what our terms mean isn't a priori since our beliefs in what our terms mean are not justified ‘apart from sensory experience’ (Rudder-Baker 2001, 384). This requires us to get clear about the force of the a priori claimed for conceptual knowledge. Let us agree to provisionally explicate a priori knowledge thus:<sup>4</sup>

- (7) *S* knows a priori that *p* iff *S* knows that *p* and *S*'s entitlement to believe that *p* is not grounded in experience.

The force of a claim to a priori knowledge depends on how we read ‘experience’ in (7). By taking experience to include all sensory experience, Rudder-Baker operates with a rather strong concept of a priori knowledge. Now suppose I employ the term ‘grandmother’ non-differentially and reflect on how I apply it across possible situations – a reflection I can pursue in the material mode by asking myself what entities I would count as grandmothers. Since sensory experience plays no evidential role in this, the knowledge I so unearth (if any) comes out a priori even on the strong conception.

Conceptual analysis is, however, often taken to be a collective enterprise in which *we* as a group aim to determine what *our* supposedly shared terms mean (see Jackman 2001). Since I need sensory experience to learn how you would apply your terms, any knowledge of how we apply our terms won't be strongly a priori. It still qualifies as a

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<sup>3</sup> Which it does, given that we accept the plural inference from “*Faa*” to “ $\exists xx(Fxx)$ ”.

<sup>4</sup> Barring the finer details, explications along these lines are to be found in Kripke 1980, 34ff Casullo 2003, Casullo 2003b, and Boghossian/Peacocke 2000b. See the introduction to this volume.

priori on a more lenient reading of (7). Call knowledge that  $p$  *weakly* a priori if the entitlement to believe that  $p$  is not grounded in experience beyond what is required to communicate the respective a priori judgments as to how we would employ our terms. Since the evidential basis remains restricted to evidence about our respective a priori judgments, this is a notion of a priori knowledge. The knowledge collective conceptual analysis yields (if any) is a priori in this weak sense. This is all a proponent of (CON) needs.<sup>5</sup>

Thirdly, Timothy Williamson (2007, ch. 5, 2004) has recently rejected the claim that counterfactuals such as (3) are happily classed as a priori. Taking a stance that I call *armchair empiricism* (see the introduction to this volume), Williamson argues that there is *no* relevant epistemic difference between the sorts of counterfactuals exemplified by (3) and (4), respectively. Williamson points out that evaluating counterfactuals such as (3) does not involve cognitive capacities fundamentally different from those we rely on in evaluating counterfactuals such as (4). From this he concludes that we should not suppose evaluating counterfactuals such as (3) to ‘raise fundamentally new questions of reliability’ (Williamson 2004, 14).

This argument from sameness of cognitive capacities to sameness of epistemic status is not convincing. (3) and (4) share their logical form  $\lceil p \Box \rightarrow q \rceil$ , but differ in the contents  $p$  and  $q$  they comprise. Williamson’s claim that evaluating (3) and (4) involves the very same cognitive capacities must thus be intended to hold irrespective of the specific contents involved. That is to say, it must be a claim about what is inevitably involved in the evaluation of all counterfactuals, understood to be statements of the form  $\lceil p \Box \rightarrow q \rceil$ . This is what Williamson appears to argue for anyway. But such a general claim about the cognitive capacity underlying the evaluation of all counterfactuals does not support his conclusion. From the fact that (3) and (4) are both of the form  $\lceil p \Box \rightarrow q \rceil$ , which ensures that the evaluation of either will involve those cognitive mechanisms involved in all evaluations of counterfactuals, it does not follow that we are as reliable in evaluating (3) as we are in evaluating (4). After all, (3) and (4) comprise different contents, and we have every reason to believe that how reliable we are at evaluating these statements will also depend on how good we are at counterfactually relating the respective contents they comprise.

To support this, consider an analogy. We may grant that we have a general capacity to evaluate statements of the form  $\lceil p \ \& \ q \rceil$ , such that evaluating “Venus revolves around the sun & Pluto revolves around the sun” does not involve cognitive capacities fundamentally different from evaluating “7 is an odd number & 11 is an odd number”. But this does nothing to show that the two statements are epistemically on a par. For they are not. Evaluating the former requires empirical knowledge of astronomical facts.

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<sup>5</sup> You don’t need to worry about this if you follow Burge (1993) and hold that there is a prior knowledge by testimony. But see Malmgreen (2006) for objections to Burge’s claim. See also Misselhorn, this volume.

Evaluating the latter requires a priori knowledge of mathematics, or so one would think. The analogous holds true for (4) and (3).

Three objections to (CON) and the meta-philosophical view that comes with it that are less straightforwardly dismissed. Semantic externalists argue that, since philosophically interesting terms have an externalist semantics, considering our judgments as to how we would apply them cannot reveal what they mean in our mouths. Hence, (CON) fails. I leave rebutting this line of argument for another occasion.<sup>6</sup> I also won't be dealing with a second objection. Taking Popper's dictum "Never let yourself be goaded into taking seriously problems about words and their meanings"(1976, 19) to their hearts, some philosophers are prone to think that for all their dialectical merits, conceptual insights are strictly speaking philosophically irrelevant. So even if (CON) was true, the conceptual knowledge procured by conceptual analysis (if any) will of necessity be philosophically impotent. This seriously underestimates the philosophical import of conceptual insight, but again, I won't argue that case here.<sup>7</sup>

What I will be concerned with is a third objection. Critics of conceptual truth contend that

- Conceptual analysis presupposes that there is knowledge of analytic truth to be had. But there aren't any analytic truths. Hence, (CON) fails.

Quine (1951) famously claimed that the notion of an analytic truth is (somehow) incoherent, and that there simply aren't any analytic truths in the first place. He offered an argument for each claim. These arguments haven't aged well, not least because the first assumes that only reductively explainable categories are admissible in semantics, and the second presupposes verificationism (see Grice/Strawson 1956, Sober 2000, Glock 2003, ch. 3). But Quine's claims are still popular. Taking a page from Quine's *Philosophy of Logic*, Peacocke, Boghossian and Cassam devise an argument they take to establish Quine's first claim. Following Cassam (2000), I call it the 'argument from factual content', and I argue that it fails (§2). I hasten to add that Boghossian (1997) is nevertheless right to shift the perspective from a metaphysical to an epistemic notion of analytic truth. As for Quine's second claim, it has recently found a staunch defender in Timothy Williamson (2006).<sup>8</sup> Williamson argues that there are no analytic truths, even given that we understand the notion epistemically rather than metaphysically. I analyse and reject his argument (§§3–4). I conclude that there is no reason to hold that (CON) fails because it is committed to conceptual truths (§5).

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<sup>6</sup> In chapters 7 to 9 of Nimitz (2007), I propose and defend a neo-descriptivist semantics that, whilst acknowledging Kripkean rigid designation, invalidates semantic externalism.

<sup>7</sup> See Lewis 1994, Jackson 1998 and Nimitz (2007), 10.1 and 10.2.,

<sup>8</sup> In fact, Williamson is even more radical than Quine himself. For unlike Quine, Williamson even maintains that no logical truth is (epistemically) analytic.

## 2. Against the Argument from Factual Content

Friends of analytically true sentences, or ‘analytic truths’, for short, invariably point to the likes of “Grandmothers are female” or “If  $A$  is a neighbour of  $B$ ,  $B$  is a neighbour of  $A$ ” as paradigm examples. This obscures that we are offered explications of what analytic truths are in terms of epistemic, metaphysical, and linguistic characteristics. Analytic truths are, first, taken to be **(E)** “such that one can determine their truth-value merely by grasping the meanings of the terms that occur in them” (Grayling 1997, 33, see Boghossian 1997, 334, Harman 1994, 45). Secondly, analytically true sentences are assumed to be **(M)** “true by virtue of meanings and independently of fact” (Quine 1951, 21; see Boghossian 2003, 15, Harman 1994, 45). Thirdly, the alethic status of analytic truths is seen as rooted in linguistic conventions, and any such sentence is deemed to be a **(L)** “truth by convention” (Salmon 1993, 125, 127f; see Putnam 1963, 39, Quine 1935, 77). Traditionally, these traits have been taken to be interdependent. The logical empiricists thought that analytic sentences are such that knowledge of what they mean suffices for knowing that they are true *because* they are purely conventional and hence non-factual, and that their non-factuality in turn guaranteed their status as necessary truths (Ayer 1946, 9, 24, ch.4, Waismann 1965, ch. 3, see Glock 2003, 72).<sup>9</sup>

The argument from factual content is designed to show that the metaphysical explication of analyticity given in (M) is incompatible with what we know about truth (Cassam 2000, Boghossian 1997, 335f, Peacocke 1993, 187, see Quine 1970, 1f, 10f). We can think of the argument as proceeding in three steps. In a first step, it is argued that, as the scheme

(T) A sentence  $S$  is true iff  $S$  means that  $p$  and  $p$

brings home, a true sentence’s truth inescapably depends on *two* factors – on what it means, and on how things (or the facts) are. To use Quine’s phrase, “no sentence is true but reality makes it so” (1970, 10). In a second step, it is stressed that proponents of (M) embrace the idea that a sentence “is analytic if it is true *solely* in virtue of (...) meaning” (Ayer 1946, 183; my italics), and hence are committed to the following *single*-factor view of analytic truth:

(8) A true sentence is an analytic truth iff its truth depends on what it means, and not at all on facts.

In a third step, it is concluded that there cannot be analytic truths in the sense of (M), and that the metaphysical concept of analyticity is of ‘dubious explanatory value, and possibly also of dubious coherence’ (Boghossian 1997, 335).

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<sup>9</sup> It is often stressed that analytic sentences are unrevisable, see Putnam 1963, 50, 62 or Spohn, this volume. I take it that this follows from these features. ‘unrevisable’ either means ‘not (dis)confirmable on empirical grounds’ and hence is on a par with non-factuality. Or it means ‘cannot be deemed false come what may’ and hence is on a par with necessity-cum-a priority.

I agree that there is something worrisome about a metaphysical explication of analytic truth. But I think that the argument from factuality rather obscures what it is. As for the first step of the argument, any true sentence's truth does indeed depend on what the sentence says and on how reality is – or, if you like, on how things are, or on how 'the world' is, or on what 'the facts'<sup>10</sup> are, or on "the holding of its [i.e. the sentence's] disquotational truth-conditions"(Peacocke 1993, 187).<sup>11</sup> So a true sentence's truth always depends on the facts, given that we read 'the facts' in that indiscriminate way in which it is equivalent to 'how things are'. As for the argument's second step, by accentuating Ayer's rather misleading 'solely', proponents of (M) are taken to deny that the truth of an analytically true sentence depends in any way on reality or the facts. But *why* should a champion of (M) be committed to denying *this*? Why should he deny that any truth depends on the facts *understood indiscriminately*?

As far as I can see, neither Ayer nor Carnap holds this view. In full, the passage from Ayer quoted above reads:

[A] proposition is analytic if it is true solely in virtue of the meaning of its constituent symbols, and cannot therefore be either confirmed or refuted by any *fact of experience*. (Ayer 1946, 183, my emphasis; see *ibid.*, 73)

Ayer here operates with a specific rather than indiscriminate sense of 'the facts'. Carnap similarly speak of 'extra-linguistic facts'(1947, 10). Hence, Ayer and Carnap at best commit themselves to

(8\*) A true sentence is an analytic truth iff its truth depends on what it means, and not at all on *extra-linguistic* facts.

In contrast to (8), (8\*) accurately captures the ideas underlying (M). An analytic truth *S* is not supposed to be non-factual by not being alethically answerable to reality. *S* is supposed to be non-factual in that no variation in reality that does not concern what *S* means can affect *S*'s truth – let things be as they may, as long as *S* means what it does, it is guaranteed to be true. It is this feature that is in turn taken to explain why knowledge of what *S* means puts one in a position to know that it is true, and hence why (E) holds good. Since substituting (8\*) for the inaccurate (8) renders the argument from factuality invalid, I conclude that it fails to show that the metaphysical explication of analyticity given in (M) is incompatible with what we know about truth. The argument from factuality shows no such thing.

For all that, I believe that the metaphysical route to explicating analytic truth charted in (M) is not to be recommended. As I have argued, Ayer and Carnap are not guilty of overlooking that truth always depends on two factors, *viz.* meaning and the facts. But

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<sup>10</sup> I have put in the scare-quotes following Boghossian (1997, 336 and 2003, 15).

<sup>11</sup> See Künne 2003, 6.2, who develops and carefully defends an account of truth that consist in rendering precise the idea that something *x* is true if things are as they are according to *x*.

they are bound to hold that the analytic truth “Bachelors are unmarried” exclusively depends on meaning and *linguistic* facts, forcing them to hold the highly contentious claim that *that bachelors are unmarried* belongs to the linguistic, rather than the extra-linguistic sphere of reality. This conventionalist ingredient (see Glock, this volume) is highly troublesome, to say the least.

Worse still, clarifying what talk of ‘extra-linguistic facts’ comes to is all but trivial. We cannot well take these facts to be the very facts analytic truths are unaffected by, for that lands us in a circle. But we cannot well make do with an intuitive understanding of ‘extra-linguistic fact’, either. Let me give an example to underscore the latter claim. On September 28, 1889, the *Conférence Générale des Poids et Mesures* set the length of one meter as that of stick no.6, a particular stick of platinum-iridium alloy procured from Johnson, Matthey & Co in London, now widely known as the ‘standard meter’. Let us suppose that for those present at the respective ceremony, the way the reference of ‘one meter’ was fixed is part of that term’s meaning. Granting that, their sentence “At the time of the ceremony, the standard meter is one meter long” should come out analytic.<sup>12</sup> But its truth manifestly depends on what we would intuitively class as extra-linguistic reality.

I have already hinted at a remedy for this problem in my paraphrases of (8\*). Since we invoke talk of ‘extra-linguistic facts’ in order to bring out that analytic truths are untouched by variations not affecting their meanings, we may as well say so directly. Taking a context to be a centred possible world that may be (partially) described by a sequence of parameters indicating the time, the place, the speaker (if any), the audience (if any), the respective possible world etc., we can do so along the following lines:

- (9)  $S$  is an analytic truth iff in any context in which  $S$  means what it actually means,  $S$  is true.

(9) skirts all issues arising from talk of ‘facts’, it rightly classes the likes of “Novikov won a Fields medal” as non-analytic, and it allows for necessary analyticities such as “Grandmothers are female” as well as for contingent analytic truths such as “At the time of the ceremony, the standard meter is one meter long”. But (9) won’t do as an account of analytic truth. Given that Novikov’s conjecture is true, and that mathematical truths are necessary, “Novikov’s conjecture is true” comes out analytic by the standards of (9). But such sentences are arguably not analytic. They fail the epistemic criterion (E), and those who hold that mathematical facts are extra-linguistic will insist that they fail (8\*) as well.

It seems that we are caught between a rock and a hard place. We had better eschew talk of ‘facts’ in explicating analytic truth, since we don’t know how to render such talk

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<sup>12</sup> Kripke 1980, 39 (see *ibid* 56, fn 21) by stipulation requires analytic truths to be necessary, and hence does not class such contingent a priori sentences as analytic. But in a well-known footnote, he adds that “[I]f statements whose truth is known via the fixing of a reference are counted as analytic, then some analytic truths are contingent” (Kripke 1980, 122, Fn 63)



precise, and our intuitive notion won't do. But we apparently need talk of 'facts' to keep our explication extensionally adequate. So what are we to do? I advocate that we part with (M) and avail ourselves of epistemic terms to tighten (9). Doing so, we arrive at

- (10) *S* is an analytic truth iff *S* actually means that *p* and in any context in which *S* means what it actually mean and one understands *S*, one is in position to know that *p*.

This is an epistemic explication of analytic truth along the lines of (E). Thus I admit that Boghossian (1997, 2003) is right to reject a metaphysical account of analyticity in favour of an epistemic understanding. We shall presently see that (10) is in need of refinement. Still, it does a good job at getting the basic idea of epistemic analyticity across.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Against Williamson Against Epistemic Analyticity I

None of the foregoing will save (CON) if Williamson is right to hold that “no truths are analytic in the epistemological sense” (2006, 8). Williamson takes epistemic analyticity to pivot on understanding/knowledge- and hence on understanding/belief-links. He thinks that to hold that there is an epistemically analytic sentence is to maintain that there is a sentence *S* such that at least the following understanding/belief-link holds good:

- (11) Necessarily, whoever understands *S* and grasps the thought it expresses assents to *S* and believes the thought *S* expresses.<sup>14</sup>

Relying “on our rough working conception of meaning and understanding” (2006, 8), Williamson argues that “[f]or even the simplest candidates for analyticity or conceptual truth, understanding is consistent with considered rejection” (ibid. 32). If that is so, then there are no epistemic analyticities, and (CON) fails to account for scenario-based reasoning after all.

To argue his case, Williamson focuses on a trivial logical truth that proponents of analyticity will unequivocally take to be epistemically analytic:

- (12) Every vixen is a vixen.

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<sup>13</sup> Boghossian himself explains that “a sentence (...) [is] *epistemically* analytic if grasp of its meaning can suffice for justified belief in the truth of the proposition it expresses” (Boghossian 2003, 15, 1997, 334). I am somewhat troubled by this account. (i) What is the force of the ‘can’, given that the straightforward rendering “ $\diamond(A \text{ grasps } S\text{'s meaning} \rightarrow S \text{ has justified belief in the truth of the proposition } S \text{ expresses})$ ” is evidently too weak? (ii) Why does grasp of meaning yield justified belief in the *truth* of the proposition, rather than justified belief in the proposition? (iii) Why merely justified belief in the truth rather than *knowledge*?

<sup>14</sup> Williamson 2006 states separate conditions for thought and language. In the case of ‘vixen are female foxes’, these are “Necessarily, whoever grasps the thought that every vixen is a female fox believes that every vixen is a vixen” (9) and “Necessarily, whoever understand the sentence ‘Every vixen is a female fox’ assents to it” (9). Nothing is lost if we combine the two, as I do.

Williamson argues that contrary to what one would think, (12) isn't an epistemic analytic after all. For we can easily conceive of someone who understands (12) but does not believe that it is true. Consider Peter, an intelligent and articulate native English speaker (ibid. 10). Peter is an expert logician and holds the odd view that universal quantification in English is existentially committing in that "There is at least one  $F$ " is a necessary condition for the truth of "Every  $F$  is  $G$ ". Peter has also been swayed by a curious conspiracy theory to believe that there are no vixens. Since he holds that the existential commitment of (12) is not fulfilled, Peter neither assents to "Every vixen is a vixen", nor believes the thought it expresses.<sup>15</sup>

According to Williamson, Peter nevertheless understands (12) and grasps the thought it expresses. Peter understands 'vixen' just as we do, taking it to be synonymous to 'female fox'. He also understands the mode of combination used in (12). More importantly still, Peter understands the English 'every' occurring in (12). After all, he is a native English speaker with a standard learning history whose conception makes little difference in practice – since Peter classifies what we consider a pragmatic presupposition as a logical inference, we usually do not even notice his deviation. Peter is also not trying to reform our language. He intends his theory to capture the meaning of 'every' in English, and he agrees to revise his account if he is proven wrong on this. What is peculiar about Peter thus is his logical theory, not his understanding, and as Williamson stresses: "Giving an incorrect theory of the meaning of a word is not the same as using the word with an idiosyncratic sense" (ibid. 12).

This ostensible counterexample leads Williamson to conclude that "Every vixen is a vixen" is *not* epistemically analytic. But then "Every vixen is a female fox" is *not* epistemically analytic, either. According to Williamson, this line of thought smoothly generalises. Since we can find some 'logical unorthodoxy' (ibid. 32) in any single case, there simply are no epistemic analyticities. (CON) is deeply flawed, or so it appears.

Let me begin my rejoinder by pointing out that as it stands, (11) isn't a happy condition on epistemic analyticity. First, a sentence is a conceptual truth relative to a community of speakers only. Speakers in America but not in England will accept "Biscuits are a type of quick bread" as a conceptual truth in their language. Secondly, since fancy goings-ons may undercut the nexus between understanding, assent and belief in distant worlds, we need to restrict (11) to nearby worlds. Thirdly, we need to confine the antecedent to cases of *clearly* understanding a sentence in order to avoid the pitfalls of Williamson's anti-luminosity-argument (see Williamson 2000, ch.3, Reed 2006, deRose 2002). But even if we take care of that, Williamson's understanding/belief-link is still

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<sup>15</sup> Williamson's 2006, 10 other example is Stephen. Stephen holds that borderline cases for vague terms constitute truth-value gaps, and that that some ancestors of foxes are borderline cases of female foxes. He concludes that ' $x$  is a vixen' is indeterminate for some value for  $x$ , and, following Kleene 1952, 334, that ' $x$  is a vixen  $\rightarrow x$  is a vixen' is undefined for that value. Since ' $x$  is a vixen  $\rightarrow x$  is a vixen' thus is not true for every value of  $x$ , Stephen concludes that ' $\forall x (x \text{ is a vixen} \rightarrow x \text{ is a vixen})$ ' is not true. (He also concludes that it is not false either.)

too strong. According to (11), understanding an epistemic analyticity leads immediately and without exception to assent and belief. But it often takes reflection on how one would employ one's terms to recognize even a simple conceptual truth such as "If *A* chases *B*, then *A* follows *B* with the intention of catching her"; and sometimes belief doesn't ensue although understanding has put one in a position to know. To be sure, Williamson is amenable to such modifications. He stresses that his Peter-case remains a counterexample even if we weaken (11) and e.g. rule that an epistemic analyticity *S* is such that it justifies the subject in assenting to *S*, or puts her in a position to recognize *S* as true. After all, Peter is not in a position to recognize "Every vixen is a vixen" as true, and given his well-reflected account of quantification, accepting it looks deeply irrational to him.

Since our (10) is as much a target of Williamson's argument than his own (11), we might just as well take these lessons to our hearts and improve on (10). Highlighting the adjustments, what we arrive at is:

(10\*) *S* is an analytic truth *community C* iff *S* actually means *in C* that *p* and in any *nearby* context in which *S* means what it actually means *in C* and one *clearly* understands *S* and thus grasps the thought *S* expresses, one is in position to know that *p*.

These refinements do nothing to lessen Williamson's challenge. Williamson argues that Peter is not in a position to know that every vixen is a vixen (by virtue of his deviant logic), yet still understands (12) and grasps the thought it expresses (by virtue of being a competent speaker of English). In his own words: "At both the level of thought and the level of language, one can understand [12] without recognizing it as true or even having a disposition to do so" (*ibi.*, 26). If true, this invalidates (10\*) just as it invalidates (11). Anyone sympathetic to epistemic analyticity needs, therefore, to reject one of the morals Williamson draws from his Peter-case.

This is what I will do. I will argue that Williamson is wrong to hold that Peter understands (12) as used in our community, as Peter employs the term 'every' in a deviant sense. Consequently, Peter does not grasp the thought we express with "Every vixen is a vixen", and that he does not understand this sentence as it is used in our community.<sup>16</sup>

There are just two options here: Either the use Peter makes of 'every' fits his own theory, but considerably and systematically deviates from how we use the term. Or Peter uses 'every' just as we do, but is unaware of that, and his semantic theory does not accord with his own use. In the latter case, Peter would be akin to Schwitzgebel's (2002, 260) Ellen. Ellen is an advanced student of Spanish who declares that all Spanish nouns ending with 'a' are feminine. Still, she correctly uses terms such as 'anarchista' as masculine when the gender of the anarchist requires it. Ellen simply holds a mistaken belief about her own use. Since this does not affect her use, Ellen's incorrect theory

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<sup>16</sup> See Kompa, this volume, for a different assessment of Williamson's argument.

does not lead to an idiosyncratic sense.<sup>17</sup> Cases like Ellen’s show that holding an incorrect theory of a word’s meaning is indeed not the same as using the word in an idiosyncratic sense, just as Williamson urges.

This is not what holds true of Peter, though. Peter is acutely aware of how he uses ‘every’, as well as of the fact that his use differs from ours. In fact, it is stipulated that Peter’s “refusal to accept [12] as true is stable under conscious reflection, exposure to further arguments and the like” (Williamson 2006, 16). In clear contrast to the way we use ‘every’, Peter reflectively employs the terms such that “Every *F* is *G*” entails “There is at least one *F*”. The deliberate and reflected use Peter makes of ‘every’ accords, moreover, with his theory. So we find that the use Peter makes of ‘every’ fits his own theory, but systematically deviates from how we use that term.

This gives us every reason to conclude that ‘every’ in Peter’s mouth does differ in sense from ‘every’ in our mouths. After all, the truth-conditions of his “Every *F* is *G*” differ from the truth-conditions of our “Every *F* is *G*”, and everyone agrees that a difference in truth-conditions makes for a difference in thought expressed. *Pace* Williamson, Peter attaches an idiosyncratic sense to ‘every’, and he does so precisely because his theory accords with him using it in an idiosyncratic fashion. Williamson rightly points out that holding an incorrect theory of a word’s meaning is indeed not the same as using the word in an idiosyncratic sense. But he does not appreciate the fact that the former *can* be a sure sign of the latter *if the incorrect theory conforms to or even shapes the speaker’s reflected use*. This is precisely what we find in Peter’s case. I therefore conclude that Peter does not grasp the thought we express with (12).

#### 4. Against Williamson Against Epistemic Analyticity II

I have argued that the reflected use Peter makes of ‘every’, deliberately deviating from ours, leads to an idiosyncratic sense for Peter’s ‘every’ after all. Williamson tries to preempt this line of thought in two different ways. On the one hand, he emphasizes that ‘every’ in Peter’s mouth must mean the same as it does in our mouths; after all, we all speak *English*. On a strict Lewisian individuation of natural languages (see Lewis 1975), this does indeed follow. But Williamson employs far more lenient criteria for speaking the same natural language, *viz.*, fluency of communication (*ibid.*, 11f) and non-deviant first acquisition (*ibid.*, 13), as he needs to do to bestow *prima facie* plausibility on his idea that Peter speaks the same language as we do. Yet on these criteria, sameness of natural language does not guarantee sameness of meaning. This fits well with the natural languages we know.

Consider e.g. the term ‘hat’. According to the OED, there are two uses of this word. On the former, a hat is almost any covering for the head. On the latter, a hat is a specific

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<sup>17</sup> Williamson 2003, 252 construes a similar case of someone who explicitly rejects the standard meaning of ‘if’, yet nevertheless happens to often use ‘if’ in its standard sense. His Peter-case, by contrast, does not pivot on the fact that a speaker is mistaken about her use.

kind of headgear that typically has “a more or less horizontal brim all round the hemispherical, conical, or cylindrical part which covers the head”. Thus there might well be a community of English speakers whose members exclusively use ‘hat’ in the former sense, and one whose members exclusively use ‘hat’ in the latter sense. The overlap in the senses would allow ordinary communication to proceed by and large smoothly. Still, the communities would use ‘hat’ in different senses. Meaning can thus cut finer than shared natural language.<sup>18</sup> Hence, the fact that we all speak English is consistent with the fact that ‘every’ in Peter’s mouth means something different from what it means in our mouths.

On the other hand, Williamson thinks that a homophonic rendering of Peter’s “Every vixen is a vixen” is more faithful to his intentions than any non-homophonic reading. After all, Peter’s logical theory attempts to capture our shared meaning of ‘every’. From this Williamson concludes that Peter associates (12) “with the same thought as we do in any relevant sense of ‘thought’” (2006, 25). But that inference is flawed. As before, since Peter’s account of (12)’s truth-conditions is inconsistent with our use, but consistent with his, we can conclude that thought we express with “Every vixen is a vixen” differs from the thought he expresses. Now it is true that in speech, we would indeed report Peter’s utterances homophonically. But that does not show that we interpret him as expressing the thought we express.

In most contexts, we report homophonically because the differences in truth-conditions do not matter. And in contexts where these differences do matter, we report homophonically because we lack a word expressing Peter’s sense of ‘every’.<sup>19</sup> But when it matters, we flag the differences: “Peter denies that every vixen is a vixen. You see, the way he uses ‘every’ is such that such a claim is true only if there are some of these things, and Peter believes that there are no vixens”. In writing we can easily devise a new term, and we would not hesitate to distinguish our ‘every<sub>1</sub>’ from Peter’s ‘every<sub>2</sub>’. There is nothing paternalistic about this. We have diagnosed a simple difference in use and meaning, and highlight it.

Please note that a difference is all we need. We hold that “Every vixen is a vixen” is a conceptual truth in our community because we think it obvious that we use ‘every’ in the sense of ‘every<sub>1</sub>’. Peter’s challenge might prompt us to reflect about the way we do and would use ‘every’ in order to determine whether the seemingly innocuous “Every vixen is a vixen” is indeed analytic in our community. But the fact that Peter’s challenge prompts us to re-assess our judgment as to how we employ the term across possible situations does not imply that “Every vixen is a vixen” is not a conceptual truth in

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<sup>18</sup> Discussing the idea that concepts are much more finely individuated than linguistic meanings, Williamson argues that it creates methodological issues such as: “to which concept does the phrase ‘the concept *square*’ refer to if the word ‘square’, with its usual meaning in English, is associated with different concepts in the minds of different speakers of English at one time (...)?” (2003, 271f). But the claim is that meaning *can* cut finer than shared natural language, not that it *must* cut finer.

<sup>19</sup> See Segal 2000, §3.3 for an argument along these lines.

our community. Reflection on our use shows clearly that it is. Even less does it follow that since such a challenge is possible in any single case, there are no epistemic analyticities. This merely implies that our judgements about which sentences are conceptual truths are generally defeasible.

This is granted anyway. There might always be a queer possible situation we have not thought of. But Peter does not draw our attention to a possible situation contemplation on which is expected to convince us that we, at least sometimes, employ “Every *F* is *G*” such that it entails “There are *F*s”. He maintains that we are wrong about the semantics of ‘every’ in our mouths although we know perfectly well how we do and would use that term. Williamson does not argue that we don’t know enough about how we use ‘every’ across possible situations to correctly identify analytic truths. He argues that there *are* no such truths, granting that we know how we use the term. Please recall that Williamson stipulates that Peter’s refusal to accept “Every vixen is a vixen” is stable under reflection, exposure to further arguments, and the like. By parity of reasoning, we can assume that *our* refusal to give in to Peter’s account is likewise stable, so that learning more about how we do and would use ‘every’ won’t change our verdict, either.

Williamson might claim that I have misunderstood the challenge. Peter holds that ‘every’ means ‘every<sub>2</sub>’ in the mouth of every competent speaker of English because that is what it means *in the English language*. So inferring differences in the meaning of ‘every’ from variations in its considered communal use does not even engage with Peter’s argument. But that would be a curious rejoinder. First of all, Peter’s claim about a language he calls ‘English’ does not even touch upon the question of what ‘every’ means in our mouths unless there is at least *prima facie* evidence that we do speak what Peter calls ‘English’. Yet it is hard to see what that evidence could be if facts about considered and reflected use are ignored. Yet if we take them into account, we find that Peter’s ‘every’ differs in meaning from our ‘every’, as I have argued above.

Secondly, Williamson avows to work within “our rough working conception of meaning and understanding” (2006, 8). But on that conception, considered use affects meaning. Suppose that it is common knowledge that your community uses ‘hat’ as a term for almost any covering for the head. If Peter were to claim that ‘hat’ in your mouth nevertheless applied exclusively to headgear with a horizontal brim all round the hemispherical part which covers the head, common sense allows you to judge that he is mistaken. For on our rough working conception, shared, consistent, and considered use manifests meaning in a community. That is anyway a sensible assumption. In the mouths of our distant forebears, ‘counterfeit’ meant ‘an original’, ‘undertaker’ meant ‘entrepreneur’, and ‘girl’ meant ‘young person’. In order to explain such historical changes in meaning, we have to grant that differences in the diachronic use of terms in a community yield differences in the terms’ meanings. But then we can hardly deny that difference in the synchronic use of terms in different groups generate differences in meanings. Hence, your community might be charged with semantic idiosyncrasy, or

with not speaking ‘proper’ English. But these differ fundamentally from the charge that you are collectively mistaken about the sense of ‘hat’ in your mouth.

## 5. Wrapping Up

The widespread reliance on scenario-based reasoning in philosophy cries out for an explanation. Given that it may rightfully be considered an a priori enterprise, as I have argued, why should reflection on scenarios such as Gettier’s cases be a reliable means to a priori establish philosophically significant modal or counterfactuals claims? I hold that the a priori entitlement we reap from contemplating philosophical scenarios stems from the fact that in contemplating these cases, we make explicit the conditions implicitly guiding our application of philosophically salient terms such as ‘causation’, ‘consciousness’, or ‘knowledge’. Of course, thinking of scenario-based reasoning as a variety of conceptual analysis aimed at procuring knowledge of conceptual truths presupposes that there are conceptual truths to be procured. Anyone committed to this faces objections along the lines of Quine’s celebrated charges that the notion of an analytic truth is (somehow) incoherent, and that there simply aren’t any analytic truths. I have done three things to counter those.

First of all, I have argued that the argument from factual content as proffered by Peacocke, Boghossian and Cassam fails. This argument is intended to show that a metaphysical explication of analyticity is incompatible with what we know about truth. Yet on scrutiny, it turns out to pivot on an ambiguity of ‘the facts’ in combination with an uncharitably reading of Ayer and Carnap. The proponents of the argument rightly hold that every true sentence’s truth depends on what it means, and on how the facts are. But they wrongly suppose that Ayer and Carnap think otherwise. Far from maintaining that true analytically sentence’s truth does not depend on how the facts are, these champions of analyticity merely hold that a true analytically sentence’s truth does not depend on how the *extra-linguistic* facts are.

Secondly, I have outlined an epistemic account of analyticity that is arguably superior to a metaphysical explication of analytic truth. As I have argued, any such metaphysical explications is likely to either rely on a highly problematic notion of extra-linguistic fact, or to erroneously class necessities such as “Novikov’s conjecture is true” as analytic. An epistemic account of analytically true sentences such as the one spelled out in (10\*) avoids both problems.

Finally, I have argued that Williamson’s recent argument fails. Williamson maintains that for any simple logical truth *S* such as “Every vixen is a vixen”, we can envisage someone like Peter who understands *S* and grasps the thought it expresses (by virtue of being a competent speaker of English), yet who is not in a position to know that *S* is true (by virtue of the deviant logic she embraces). Williamson concludes that there are no epistemic analyticities. I have argued that Peter uses ‘every’ in a deviant sense and associates a different thought with sentences such as “Every vixen is a vixen”; after all,

his “Every  $F$  is  $G$ ” and our “Every  $F$  is  $G$ ” differ in truth-conditions. I have also argued that this claim does not commit us to holding that Peter isn’t a competent speaker of the English language we share. On the lenient criteria Williamson himself employs, *viz.* fluency of communication and non-deviant first acquisition, the fact that  $A$  and  $B$  speak the same natural language  $L$  does not entail that all words of  $L$  have in  $A$ ’s mouth the very sense they have in  $B$ ’s.  $A$  might well be willing to calling a woollen cap a ‘hat’, whereas  $B$ , looking in vain for a horizontal brim, might not.



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