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Conclusion: The Problems of Philosophy

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Kant's formulation of the task of metaphysics as explaining the pos-
sibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge, together with the failure of his
own explanation, set philosophy on a course which led in the twen-
tieth century to the linguistic criticism of metaphysics. This formula-
tion was proposed in order to rescue metaphysics from Hume's
charge that it falls between the two stools of *a priori* conceptual anal-
ysis and *a posteriori* experimental reasoning. Kant believed that Hume
failed to recognize the synthetic nature of mathematics and, there-
fore, failed to see that metaphysics could not be abandoned without
sacrificing mathematics.

Kant expresses the general form of the problem by cross-classifying
propositions on the basis of two distinctions: the analytic vs. the syn-
thetic and the *a priori* vs. the *a posteriori.* The former is a semantic
distinction, contrasting propositions whose predication is explicative
with propositions whose predication is ampliative. The latter is an
epistemological distinction, contrasting propositions that can be
known independently of all experience with propositions that can be
known only through experience. The result is the familiar four-celled
matrix in which the synthetic *a priori* cell contains mathematical and
metaphysical propositions.

Kant's aim in this cross-classification was to show that Hume's em-
piricism cannot account for all of our knowledge. It may account for
the content of the analytic *a priori* and the synthetic *a posteriori* cells,
but not for the content of the synthetic *a priori* cell. Knowledge of
propositions in the analytic *a priori* cell is unproblematic. Because
they have explicative predicates, *a priori* knowledge of their semantic
structure suffices to show that the condition under which we pick out
the things the propositions are about guarantees that those things
have the properties predicated of them. Knowledge of propositions
in the synthetic *a posteriori* cell is also unproblematic. Because the

propositions are *a posteriori*, empirical knowledge of the way the world is suffices to show that the things the propositions are about have the properties predicated of them. However, the propositions in the synthetic *a priori* cell pose a problem for Humean empiricism. Since the propositions in this cell have ampliative predicates, their truth value cannot be learned from examining their semantic structure. But, since these propositions are also *a priori*, their truth value cannot be learned from observing the way the world is, either. Since Humean empiricism countenances only relations of ideas and matters of fact, an account of our knowledge of mathematical and other propositions in the third cell is beyond Humean empiricism.

Kant thinks that, once we distinguish synthetic propositions like those of mathematics which apply to objects that never appear in experience from synthetic propositions like those of empirical science which apply to objects in experience, it is clear that something more than Humean empiricism is required to account for our knowledge. Kant's alternative to the empiricist's claim that experience is the source of our synthetic knowledge was that the mind itself is "the author of the experience in which its objects are found." Kant explains our synthetic *a priori* knowledge in terms of the conformity of objects to our sensibility and understanding rather than in terms of their conformity to external objects presented to us through the senses. Kant believed that his Copernican Revolution uncovered the source of our synthetic *a priori* knowledge because it explains how synthetic propositions can apply to objects that never appear in experience.

Although Kant's transcendental idealism was remarkably successful in satisfying many philosophers for a substantial period of time, eventually deep troubles began to emerge. First, despite Kant's protests, transcendental idealism does not seem enough of an improvement on ordinary idealism to solve the basic metaphysical problems about knowledge. Transcendental idealism seems, in the final analysis, as much a surrender to the Cartesian skeptic as empirical idealism. Second, Einstein's relativistic physics refuted Kant's claim that Euclidean geometry expresses synthetic *a priori* knowledge of space, thereby not only depriving Kant of an account of geometrical knowledge, but also, and more importantly, putting his entire account of synthetic *a priori* knowledge under a cloud of suspicion. Third, persistent difficulties with the distinctions, apparatus, and argumentation in the *Critique* eroded confidence in Kant's reformist cure. The accumulation of such difficulties over the years has left little confidence in its early promise to, once and for all, put metaphysics on a sure course where, leaving behind the interminable squabbles of earlier times, it can make progress comparable to that in the sciences.

These troubles disillusioned many philosophers with Kant's explanation of the possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge, which, in turn, created skepticism about Kant's explanation of the task of metaphysics. Because of this skepticism and because of the unflattering pace of progress in metaphysics in comparison to the pace of progress in science, many philosophers eventually soured on Kant's reformist cure for metaphysics, with the result that a radical cure in the Humean spirit came to seem attractive once again. The flourishing of deflationary naturalistic and positivistic philosophies in the nineteenth century was one consequence. Very early in the twentieth century, the work of Frege, Moore, and others for a time checked the influence of these philosophies, but, by the middle of the century, resistance to them had all but disappeared, and Logical Positivism's neo-Humeanism, Wittgenstein's radical critical philosophy, and Quinean naturalism came to dominate the scene.

Ironically, it was Frege, who was sympathetic to Kant and in part concerned with improving Kantian philosophy, who provided the impetus and the tools for undermining Kant's reformist cure. The strength of Kant's position derived from the fact that his sense-containment conception of analyticity links the fate of metaphysics with that of mathematics by characterizing both as synthetic. Frege revealed various shortcomings in Kant's notion of analyticity and in the theory of meaning on which it rests. He hoped, of course, to remove these shortcomings, and, in this spirit, he defined analytic propositions as consequences of logical laws plus definitions. But the Fregean conception of analyticity together with Frege's logicism created the possibility of cutting the link that Kant had forged between the fate of metaphysics and that of mathematics. This conception of analyticity expands sense containment from "beams in the house" containment to "plant in the seeds" containment, thereby allowing the predicate of a logical proposition—and, with logicism, of a mathematical proposition—to be "contained" in its subject. The Logical Positivists were quick to try to cut the link between metaphysics and mathematics by using Frege's semantics in an effort to show that mathematical and logical truth is nothing more than analytic truth in something like Frege's broad sense.

Contrary to the general opinion, the disastrous feature for non-naturalism in Frege's work is not the absence of an epistemology suitable for his realist ontology, but rather the presence of a semantics that reconstructs analyticity in a way which, unlike the traditional

theory of meaning, provides no basis for the Kantian formulation of the task of metaphysics. At the time, the traditional theory of meaning was nowhere near sufficiently developed to take on Frege's semantics or to bear the weight that the Kantian account of metaphysics puts on it. Once Frege's work focused the issue of the existence of synthetic *a priori* knowledge on questions of language and meaning, making the philosophy of language the central area in philosophy and meaning the central topic in the philosophy of language, positivists and naturalists were able to exploit both the underdevelopment of the traditional theory of meaning and Frege's contributions to philosophy, logic, and mathematics in order to undercut the Kantian account of metaphysics. The underdeveloped state of the traditional theory was the Achilles' heel of Kant's reformist cure for metaphysics, and Frege's semantics was Paris's arrow.

Indeed, the main course of Anglo-American philosophy in this century can be charted in terms of the three distinct ways in which the underdeveloped state of this theory or Frege's work, and particularly, his semantics, was exploited to mount linguistic attacks on metaphysics. One was the way in which the Logical Empiricists exploited both. Schlick writes:

> The meaning of a word is solely determined by the rules which hold for its use. Whatever follows from these rules, follows from the mere meaning of the word, and is therefore purely analytic, tautological, formal. The error committed by the proponents of the factual *a priori* can be understood as arising from the fact that it was not clearly realized that such concepts as those of the colors have a formal structure just as do numbers or spatial concepts, and that this structure determines their meaning without remainder. . . . Thus, [sentences which are the showpieces of the phenomenological philosophy] say nothing about existence, or about the nature of anything, but rather only exhibit the content of our concepts, that is, the mode and manner in which we employ the words of our language. . . . they bring no knowledge, and cannot serve as the foundations of a special science. Such a science as the phenomenologists have promised us just does not exist.[1]

As Schlick indicates in this quotation, he believed that a logical semantics, presumably based on Frege's work (as developed by Russell and Wittgenstein), could account for allegedly factual *a priori* truths as "purely analytic," thereby making otiose a special science of intuition such as Husserl and the phenomenologists were advocating.

This program seemed promising because, with the underdeveloped state of the traditional theory of meaning, nothing appeared to stand in the way of using Frege's broad notion of analyticity to refurbish Hume's category of relations of ideas and thereby deny the synthetic nature of logic and mathematics. Logical Empiricists could thereby revitalize British Empiricism.

The two other ways in which naturalists exploited the underdevelopment of the traditional theory of meaning to undermine the Kantian formulation of the task of metaphysics have been extensively discussed in previous chapters. Wittgenstein's critique of theories of meaning in the Frege-Russell tradition paved the way for the new version of his radical critical philosophy in the *Philosophical Investigations*. My argument in chapter 2 to the effect that the proto-theory escapes Wittgenstein's critique can in part be read as an account of why the underdeveloped state of the traditional theory of meaning— particularly, in encouraging philosophers to see Frege's semantics as simply an explication of the traditional theory—made the theory seem vulnerable to his critique.

The third way in which philosophers exploited the underdevelopment of the traditional theory was, of course, Quine's attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction, which paved the way for his attempt to naturalize epistemology. The argument in chapter 5 to the effect that Quine's criticisms of intensionalist semantics overlook the most natural form for an intensionalist theory to take within the framework of linguistics can in part be read as an account of why the underdeveloped state of the theory of meaning made intensional theory seem vulnerable to Quine's criticisms—particularly, in encouraging philosophers to see Quine's picture of the Bloomfieldian grammatical paradigm as the only one for theories in linguistics.

In all three of these ways, the aim was to undercut the Kantian formulation of the task of metaphysics by emptying the synthetic *a priori* cell of the Kantian matrix. The Logical Positivists like Schlick sought to empty it by moving all the propositions that Kant had put there over into the analytic *a priori* cell. Wittgenstein sought to empty it by getting rid of metaphysical propositions as pieces of nonsense and moving the remaining mathematical and logical propositions down into the synthetic *a posteriori* cell. According to Wittgenstein, what we should say about a logical or mathematical proof is "this is simply what we *do*. This is use and custom among us, a fact of our natural history" (RFM: 61). Quine sought to demote all *a priori* propositions, analytic and synthetic alike, down to the synthetic *a posteriori* cell. "Epistemology," Quine writes, "is best looked upon . . . as an

enterprise within natural science," and in natural science there are "only Hume's regularities, culminating here and there in what passes for an explanatory trait or the promise of one."[2]

It is now generally recognized that the Logical Empiricist attack on metaphysics failed both because its various verificationist doctrines could not be made to work and because, as Quine acutely saw, Carnap's attempt to provide a suitable explication of the notion of synonymy in Frege's definition of analyticity on the basis of "meaning postulates" fails.[3] As we can see from the previous chapters, this attempt to assimilate semantics to logic, rather than reconstructing traditional semantic theory, deforms that theory in a way which sacrifices the very features that explain what analyticity is for natural languages generally. In particular, casting the theory of meaning in the form of postulates modeled on logical postulates sacrifices the decompositional sense structure which underlies the "beams in the house" notion of containment and, with it, the narrow analytic/synthetic distinction.

Given the arguments in the previous chapters, the other two ways of trying to undercut the Kantian conception of metaphysics can also be seen to have failed. Given the arguments in chapters 2, 3, and 4, Wittgenstein's attempt to get rid of metaphysical sentences and to show that logical and mathematical facts are nothing more than facts of "our natural history" fails because his critique of theories of meaning does not eliminate them all and so does not leave the field clear for his new conception of meaning. Furthermore, given the arguments in chapters 5 and 6, Quine's attempt and that of his followers to show that all propositions are *a posteriori* also fail, and, as we shall see, their case for a naturalized epistemology, as a consequence, collapses. Therefore, my arguments in the course of this book are arguments to show that none of these attempts succeeds in emptying the synthetic *a priori* cell.

Just as the arguments in those chapters show that what allowed these attempts to get as far as they did was the underdeveloped state of the traditional theory of meaning, so they also show that what blocks these attempts from succeeding is the development of the proto-theory. Many of the critical features of that theory—for example, decompositional structure—were latent in the traditional theory of meaning, for example, in Locke's and Kant's notion of concept inclusion. The development of a theory that explicitly contains these and other features which distinguish it from the Fregean theories that Wittgenstein, Quine, Putnam, etc. were criticizing is already enough to remove the vulnerable point in Kant's formulation of the task of

metaphysics. It is clear, from what has been said in this book and in the works about the proto-theory to which I have referred, that none of those criticisms shows that the theory cannot bear the philosophical weight of Kant's cross-classification of propositions into analytic vs. synthetic and *a priori* vs. *a posteriori*. Moreover, on the proto-theory, the content of the cells comes out quite close to what it is on Kant's original description of the cross-classification. The propositions of mathematics and metaphysics which Kant put in the synthetic *a priori* cell can remain, and, given the narrow notion of analyticity in place of Frege's broad notion, we can even augment Kant's examples of synthetic *a priori* truths with truths of logic.

An interesting conclusion emerges: the arguments in this book take twentieth-century philosophy full circle round, back to the point prior to the Logical Positivist, Wittgensteinian, and Quinean attacks on metaphysics. The three attacks that challenged the Kantian foundations for metaphysics by trying to transfer the contents of the synthetic *a priori* cell over to the analytic *a priori* cell, erasing them or demoting them to the synthetic *a posteriori* cell, were unsuccessful. But their supposition that the traditional theory of meaning is the soft underbelly of the Kantian move to provide new foundations for metaphysics misjudged the condition of that theory. Its vulnerability reflected not inherent, fatal defects in the theory, but only the neglect the theory had experienced over the centuries. Thus, proper attention to the theory brings us back to facing the problems of metaphysics as Kant formulated them.

Of course, this is not to say that we are led back to Kantian theory. My arguments endorse only Kant's question of how knowledge of synthetic *a priori* truths is possible. They do not endorse Kant's answer that the objects of knowledge have to conform to our sensibility and understanding. Nothing I have said saves that answer from the difficulties it has been found to have over the years. Thus, we are once again faced with metaphysical problems, but without Kant's transcendental idealism as a way of solving them, without the linguistic turn as a way of dissolving them, and without naturalized epistemology as a way of recasting them. In this chapter I want to explore some aspects of this situation. Among the questions that naturally arise at this point are: How worthwhile are the accounts of knowledge as *a posteriori* knowledge of natural objects in this situation? How should we conceive of explanations of how synthetic *a priori* knowledge is possible? What attitude should we take toward the legendary obstinacy of metaphysical problems?