Analysis and Propositions
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Thesis
This talk aims to offer a standard defence of modern analytic philosophy, but with the added claim that the project only works if we focus on our propositions, and do not become enmeshed in the difficulties we have in expressing these propositions in language.

Attacks on philosophy
Let me start by citing the inaugural address of Prof. Trevor Hussey in 2004, when he suggested that the attacks on philosophy (which, intriguingly, often come from philosophers themselves) fall into four main groups. The fans of the modern scientific world view are inclined to see philosophy as a respected early pioneer of research, which is now being displaced by rigorous empirical methods, even in such bastions of philosophy as epistemology and ethical principles, so that philosophy is on the brink of becoming **redundant**. Other critics have perennially despised philosophy for its remote abstractions, convinced that it is pretentious and **meaningless**, despite all the books, journals and conferences it generates. A third group take the view that a subject which aims at solving the central dilemmas of human life should now be deemed to have thoroughly **failed** in its task, after 2,500 years of effort by many great intellects. And the fourth group are struck by the way in which an obsession with rigour, in the form of symbolic logic and formal semantics, has reduced the subject to a scholastic **triviality** that has lost sight of all serious goals.

For some views of philosophy, these attacks may be right
There is not much point in attacking a subject if you have no conception of what it is trying to do, and I think that each of these four criticisms (that philosophy is redundant, or meaningless, or a failure, or trivial) has in some way failed to understand the project. If it is true that philosophy aspires to be either a theoretical pioneer that directs scientific research, or a humble under-labourer who is just polishing the tools for the scientists, then philosophy really does begin to look redundant as far as the scientists are concerned, and philosophers can only make a contribution if they really master the scientific discipline in which they are interested. If, alternatively, philosophy is taken to aim at understanding nature at a very high level of **abstraction**, it is undeniable that there is a lot of scope for pretentious meaninglessness and charlatanism at such a rarefied level, and that students of the subject often have a very tenuous grasp of its central concepts. If, thirdly, philosophy is taken to be aiming at a set of **true doctrines**, supported by accurate argument, then there is clearly not a lot to show for its long and arduous history, and philosophy may have failed (though I have seen atheism suggested as its one triumphant achievement). And fourthly there is no denying that a glance in any analytic philosophy journal will reveal long discussions of **minute points** of reasoning about what appear to be mere logical puzzles, reminiscent of famous medieval debates about the bodily magnitude of angels – the very epitome of intellectual triviality.

What might analytic philosophy be?
However, it is possible that these attacks rest on a misunderstanding about the aims of analytic philosophy, so we must look more closely. I can find about seven views of the subject, as follows:

First, there is a quest for the **necessary and sufficient conditions** for the existence of an entity, or a situation, or a process, or an event. The necessary conditions are those which are indispensible, and the sufficient conditions (often a bunch of necessary ones) are those which make the target inevitable. This is roughly what Socrates was seeking about the nature of virtue, and Plato about justice and knowledge, and Aristotle about the nature of being.

Second, there is the aim of **reduction**, by analysing down to simple, immediate and atomic ingredients, as when Hume seeks an analysis of every idea in terms of basic impressions of experience, or Russell in 1918 wanted to reduce our understanding to 'logical atoms'.

Third, there is the quest for **definitions**, so that analysis homes in on a concise and clear summary of the exact nature of each thing. Socrates, again, is the pioneer of this project, and formally expressed definitions have been a standard feature of modern analytic writing, as in the prolonged attempt at pinning down a definition of knowledge.

Fourth, analytic philosophers aim to achieve **precision** in our thought and reasoning, by homing in on phenomena such as ambiguity and vagueness, and assertions about the possible, or reference to what doesn't exist, and to the basic ingredients of our thought, such as objects, and their properties and relations. Logic is used as a tool to pin such things down with the sort of rigour normally only found in mathematics.

Fifth, there is the use of analysis to identify the main **categories** of reality, or of our understanding of it. This analysis goes in the opposite direction from reduction, seeking what unifies groups of entities, rather than what underpins each member.

Sixth, there is the project of mapping **conceptual relationships**. Typical relationships are causal, inferential, containing or grounding. Some, such as David Papineau, take this analysis to be entirely a priori, making it a genuine activity but with a status resembling that of lexicography, while others take it to be something like the mapping of reality at a highly abstract level.

Seventh, there is analysis which focuses on **language**, and examines our links to reality through the complexities of reference, predication, syntax, formal semantics, sense, logical form and pragmatics. A shared notion here is the view of Quine that what exists is simply what is expressed by the references of our best scientific theories.

Assessing these views
Let me give a brief reaction to each of these seven views of analysis:

I take the search for **necessary and sufficient conditions** to be very illuminating. In the case of knowledge, it is notorious that the debate led to dull quibbles about the so-called Gettier Problem, and to theories confronting one another with little clarity about how to arbitrate and find a winner. The fact is, though, that epistemology has made huge advances because of this failed quest, in realisations about external justification, and about contextual justification.

The attempt to analyse down to **basics** seems to me to have gone badly. The idea that our picture of reality is simply rooted in empirical or self-evident or logical facts seems implausible, and horribly narrow if just one of these is chosen as the basic ingredient. There always seem to be problem cases for the simple view, as when philosophers try to analyse arithmetic down to simple empirical or logical facts.

I like the quest for **definitions**, but only if we have a broad Aristotelian notion of definition. For us the word 'definition' conjures up compact one-liners in dictionaries, and some analytic philosophers aim at such things. Personally I think there is nothing more mind-numbing than a typical modern paragraph which begins 'so-and-so =df', followed by a formal legalistic sentence full of algebraic letters and logical symbols. But thorough Aristotelian definitions, possibly the length of a full book, expressed in clear ordinary language, I take to be an excellent addition to our understanding, even though perfection here may be impossible.

The quest for **precision** has become so specialised and technical that attempts by amateurs to read the latest findings can be a frightening experience. It is a project to which only post-doctoral logicians can make any sort of contribution, as it requires expertise in mathematical logic, modal logic, first- and second-order logic, mereology and set theory, and probably several other disciplines I have not even heard of. But it all looks to me thoroughly worthwhile, even if the results are inconclusive, and it is worth hunting for any reports of the work which are written in plain English.

The search for the true **categories** of existence also strikes me as not having gone terribly well. The realisation that different cultures and language groups might carve the world at rather different joints from the ones we employ makes it incredibly hard to pin down a set of true categories, and those proposed by Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Russell, Roderick Chisholm, E.J. Lowe and others, all seem to confront one another in a position of stalemate. This may be one area which is genuinely beyond us, but I remain enamoured of the ideal that we might categorise the world.

Those who aspire to wisdom by analysing **concept-relationships** must face the challenge of G.E. Moore's 'paradox of analysis' - that a perfect analysis only reveals the ingredients you started with, and so is totally uninformative. It is like beginning a bike ride by taking your bike apart. There are two quite adequate replies to this. The first is that it is not proposed that each concept is analysed in isolation, with merely its internal components laid out for inspection. Analysing inferential, containing, grounding and causal

relationships between concepts is the process of mapping our understanding of the world, and if you reject a possible map of that it could only be because you aren't interested in our understanding of the world. The second reply is that concepts extend beyond our minds and plug into the world, so that the analysis of a flourishing conceptual scheme is an analysis of the reality to which it refers. As Urmson remarked, we are 'trying to analyse the facts, not just our concepts of them'. The key to retaining this link between our concepts and reality is to place a robust sense of truth at the centre of the process of analysis, both in identifying truth-conditions that give content to the propositions, and in understanding what are appropriate truth-makers for them.

The disastrous cul-de-sac

Finally there is the analysis of **language** as the route to wisdom, which I will deal with a little more fully. It is undeniable that we have gained a great deal of illumination from theories of reference and meaning, but on balance I take the placing of language at the centre of analytic philosophy to be a bad move. I am not talking here of ordinary language philosophy, but mainly of the view which began in section 62 of Frege's *Foundations of Arithmetic,* to deduce our reality from the way in which our most precise language articulates it. Quine's quest for the ontological commitments of science is the culmination of this (leading to his 'desert landscape' containing nothing apart from objects and sets of objects). This project is misguided in its grand design, and very dispiriting in its practice, since it leads to interminable discussions about what exactly you mean when you say Pegasus doesn't exist, or the present King of France is bald, or the Morning Star is identical to the Evening Star.

My own view (simplistic perhaps, but heartfelt) is that these questions are of great importance and interest for logicians, but of very little significance for philosophy. The very simple observation which greatly impresses me is that these types of problem occur in written philosophy, but vanish in philosophical talk. If you read a note saying 'going down to the bank', in some situations that could be ambiguous between going down to the edge of the river and going down to the place where they gamble with our money. But if the writer is present, you can ask them, and the ambiguity is resolved. The *note* may be confusing, but no one is ever *mentally* confused about which bank they are going to. Similar enquiries will reveal whether the speaker thinks Pegasus refers to something, and whether they think France has a king, and whether they utter exciting discoveries or boring tautologies about the solar system.

Similar points can be made about a favourite problem in contemporary philosophy – the difficulties involved in reasoning about vague objects like clouds, and vague predicates like 'smooth'. If you want to spend a sleepless night tonight, try to settle the question of whether there is a tallest short giraffe [is there a tallest short giraffe?]. But in ordinary life no one clutches their head in intellectual anguish over the remark 'that's a tall giraffe', because its exact meaning can always be clarified by context or by further enquiry.

The things that matter in philosophy are not locked into the horrible uncertainties of language. John Heil seems to be right that if you begin your philosophy with ordinary language, you will find yourself permanently stuck there, and Scott Soames seem to be right that if analysing language is the aim, you don't need to be a philosopher to do that. Philosophers mainly debate about beliefs, but (as Ryle beautifully observed) while we can think in French, no one believes in French. Our assertions and convictions are encapsulated not in sentences but in propositions. I take good philosophy to focus on unambiguous and non-vague propositions, and not on the muddles that arise when we try to express them. Let me first summarise my own view of analysis, and I will then devote the rest of this talk to defending my belief in propositions, since it is in the analysis of such things that I take serious and productive philosophy to reside.

My preferred view

The view of analytic philosophy I favour can be summarised as follows: we should aim to enhance our understanding of the important general truths about reality, by focusing on the key concepts that occur in our propositions, and aim to produce what is best described as a 'map' of them. This consists of a 'vertical' analysis, downwards towards the possible basic ingredients of our understanding, and to a grasp of what grounds what, and upwards towards the broad categories about which we can generalise, and a 'horizontal' analysis of the inclusive and exclusive relations between concepts, and of the patterns of inference between them. This last one means (in the words of Plato) following the 'wind of the argument' to see where it leads, and the map-making demands that we keep track of the successes and failures in the arguments.

The linguistic approach to ontological commitment is that since you can hardly say 'There are four motorway service stations between here and Bristol' if you don't have an ontological commitment to motorway service stations, so you can't say 'There are four prime numbers between ten and twenty' without being committed to prime numbers. My view is that if you want to know someone's ontological commitments then you ask them, and you will then find that most people believe in the reality of motorway service stations, but that they are not so sure about the real existence of prime numbers.

I don't have to be committed to the existence of a single perfect conceptual map in order to practise philosophy in this way. We may end up with torn fragments of maps, riddled with cultural bias and errors in reasoning, but I just can't think of a better strategy. The dream of achieving a perfect map will impose requirements of criticism and precision on us, and the subservience of abstract concepts to empirical facts. I believe this view of philosophy meets most of the objections to philosophy which Trevor Hussey identified. It is serious, it deals with genuine concepts grounded in reality, it is not beyond us, and it has enormous value for an enhanced human life. It also has as a particular strength that if philosophy is understood as this sort of abstract mapping then it has made enormous progress during the last two and a half millennia. The ancient Greeks were utterly wonderful in their philosophical pioneering, but they would all be thrilled to bits to read any modern introduction to a branch of philosophy such as epistemology or ethical theory, and discover how many new aspects of the problems have been mapped out since their time.

What are propositions?
Let me now look at the notion of a proposition. The general idea of a proposition is what someone meant – irrespective of how they expressed it. Ironic sentences, for example, are held to state the opposite of their intended propositions, and the fun is when you are misled by the sentence, and then suddenly spot the underlying proposition. I can find five principle accounts of the nature of propositions. Early in his career Russell thought of propositions as complexes of things **in the world**, so that true propositions existed as features of real things, awaiting possible expression by speakers. He abandoned the view, but so-called 'Russellian' propositions still have supporters. Personally I find them a puzzle, and an unnecessary addition to a crowded world. The notion of a 'fact' probably does the job better, even though the question 'how many facts are there in this room?' is as bewildering as 'How many propositions are there in this room?'

One difficulty with Russellian propositions is that there seem to be propositions about possibilities as well as about actuality. The solution to this, associated with David Lewis, is to treat propositions as **sets of possible worlds**. Lewis thought of possible worlds as concrete realities, so he is like Russell in treating propositions as reducible to reasonably familiar objects, properties and relations. Personally I find this even less satisfactory than the Russellian view, as the proposition that I might have forgotten my toothbrush hardly seems like a vast complex of possible worlds where the toothbrush is absent.

Frege was an early fan of propositions (the idea of such things having originated with Bolzano in 1837). Frege called them 'thoughts', and held them to be **platonic entities** found in some 'third realm' between the mind and the world. This is the opposite of the reductive approach, and elevates propositions to a grand status in the fabric of reality, somewhat like Plato's Forms. Apart my aversion to platonism, I think such views founder on the difficulty of individuating propositions. It is easy to conjure up a vast profusion of propositions in the third realm, if you start to think of disjunctive propositions like 'roses are red or 10 = 12', which seems to be true, and deserves its place in any platonic pantheon.

There are, of course, sceptics about propositions, who either deny them, or reduce them to sentences. Ayer says a proposition is just a set of **equivalent sentences** (though personally I don't see how you can judge them to be equivalent without comparing their underlying meanings). Quine said there was no way to separate off the proposition from the sentence, and Davidson didn't see how things as different as sentences and propositions could have any relationship.

Propositions in the mind
The fifth view of propositions, and the one which I wish to support, is that they are **pre-linguistic mental events** that are attempts at conceiving possible facts. Two phenomena have always convinced me of the existence of such things – firstly the rather obvious fact that animals can think things like 'we are about to go for a walk' without the use of language, and secondly the findings of my own introspection. I am especially impressed by what goes through my mind when I am actually speaking a sentence, where neither the beginning nor the end of the sentence I am currently speaking seem to figure anywhere in my immediate

consciousness. If you add to these reasons my earlier observations about beliefs not requiring a language, and the absence of ambiguity or vagueness from even my most misguided thoughts, then the existence of propositions seems blatant. A further point is that indexical sentences are a great puzzle to linguistic philosophers, but quite straightforward within mental propositions. 'I am ill' or 'it is now raining' cause great perplexity to some analytic philosophers because they keep changing their truth conditions, depending on the time, location and speaker, but I take these to be single sentences which can express innumerable propositions. If today I say 'I am ill' and then tomorrow you say 'I am ill', we may speak the same sentence, but our propositions are entirely different. Only philosophers and logicians find any problem here. Of course, indexicals are a great puzzle if propositions are Russellian or Fregean entities external from us, but this gives us a further reason to believe that propositions only exist within individual minds.

It might be objected that in practice we are still stuck with sentences, because that is the only way we can get at these elusive propositions, but I think the situation is best encapsulated in T.S. Eliot's remark that "it is impossible to say just what I mean". If someone these days says 'I believe in God', we have a sentence, but we are unlikely to have got at the person's proposition until we enquire what they mean by 'God'. Occasionally we find that the person doesn't really know, and so there was no proposition after all, but usually a conversation gets tantalisingly closer to what the person has in mind, without ever quite pinning it down. Once the speakers have done their best to identify the proposition, the true discussion can begin. I presume that philosophical discussion should focus on what philosophers mean and believe, rather than on the inadvertent uncertainties and confusions of their linguistic expressions. One sentence is often sufficient to express a given proposition, but for others it may take twenty sentence before we fully grasp a more elusive proposition.

Objections to analysis of propositions
I am claiming that if you adopt my view of philosophical analysis as conceptual mapping, following 'vertical' and 'horizontal' routes, and using a variety of techniques to identify grounding and inference relations, and combine this mapping with a focus on propositions rather than sentences, then rewards in understanding will follow, provided that truth remains central to the project. There are, however, some interesting objections to face. Nietzsche said we should fight for our concepts rather than analysing them, and Deleuze says the aim of philosophy is the creation of concepts rather than their analysis. This appealing continental view seems to have its origins in Hegel's belief that propositions (or thoughts) are atomic unities, incapable of analysis, but I take that claim to be false, since philosophers seem to analyse propositions all day long.

There is also the important claim that understanding comes from the synthesis of ideas rather than from their analysis – but even Russell agreed with this. You may take the bike to pieces, but the rewards come when you put it back together, and understand properly how to use it. The process of synthesis is particularly evident when you analyse 'horizontally', and larger areas of the picture begin to emerge.

A final worry, which I take seriously, is that the analytic approach tempts us to focus on concepts which seem amenable to interesting analysis, while the concepts that really matter may be the more recalcitrant ones which we skirt around. I'm thinking of moral philosophers who analyse rules for right action, while skirting around the central enigma of why anything has 'value' in the first place, or metaphysicians who drastically claim that there are no unified entities, simply because the concept of 'unity' seems to resist accurate analysis. Maybe analysis is the way to get to the unanalysable heart of things. We seek understanding, which seems to derive from explanations, and a bedrock explanation is likely to be a combination of things which can and things which can't be analysed.

The rewards of propositional analysis
Let me conclude optimistically by suggesting the benefits of my approach. The world contains many sentences, but far fewer propositions. We rarely (I would suggest) have thoughts which are totally inexpressible, but the human race has thousands of languages, and each language has innumerable ways of expressing a given proposition. Davidson's principle of charity invites us to think that human propositions have a huge amount in common, despite diversities of expression. In ordinary life human beings actually work with a quite limited range of propositions, despite the huge diversities implied by language. So I claim that this approach to philosophy breaks down the barriers between diverse languages and cultures, where

linguistic analysis had tended to emphasise the gaps between us (as in Quine's discussion of radical translation, and what to make of someone uttering the mysterious word 'gavagai').

Furthermore, reasoning about sentences has led to a huge industry aimed at finding the logical form, or the correct semantics, for a profusion of difficult sentences (try, for example, giving the logical form of 'some critics only admire one another' – a perennial favourite), but reasoning about agreed propositions will have eliminated vagueness and ambiguity at an early stage, and is likely to make much more progress. We must distinguish here between human reasoning and formal logic, where I take the latter to be aspiring to implementation on some sort of machine (such as Alan Turing envisaged). I want human reasoning to go well, and that is actually, I think, a lot easier than trying to build machines that can use language-based logic. Thus I think analysis through propositions helps us to converge on the Kantian notion of the 'space of pure reasons'.

I take it, perhaps for evolutionary reasons, that our thinking engages fairly directly with the world. Our language, on the other hand, leads us off into wonderful cultural complexities and confusions. So while the world of language is a paradise for poets, it is the world of thought (rather than language) that should be the focus of those who seek after truth about the world. For example, another small but revealing advantage of propositions over sentences is that if I say 'John and Janet are playing tennis', I may have a frisson of anxiety over whether it would have been more politically correct to say 'Janet and John are playing tennis' – but in my mental proposition Janet and John don't play in an order, so the sentence is just introducing an irrelevant difficulty that isn't actually there in the original thought. When someone like David Starkey utters dubious ideas in public, we should aim our criticisms at what he really meant, not at the unfortunate nuances of what he happened to say.

Above all, I take philosophy to be about people, so I take ontological commitment not to be about the sentences they utter or the theories they subscribe to, but what sort of things people deep down believe in, and that is what we want to get at (in exactly the way that Socrates demanded). The general aim of analysis is to enhance human life, by enhancing our ability to think about it.

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