Philosophical Method without the Linguistic Turn

Peter Simons
Trinity College Dublin

Published in: Conséquence 1 (2015), 52–80.

1 Why the linguistic turn is no longer acceptable
2 The Role of Common Sense
3 The Position of Science
4 The Primacy of Metaphysics
5 Aspiring to System
6 Philosophy and the Armchair

1 Why the linguistic turn is no longer acceptable

Many philosophers, among whom I count myself, consider that philosophy made considerable advances in the twentieth century through the development of that broad movement known as analytic philosophy. In contrast with the philosophy of the previous century, modern analytic philosophy is in general more exact, more intersubjectively testable, less subject to the whims of individual philosophers, in a word, more like science than philosophy had generally been hitherto. Of course there have been exceptions to this, and the story is not completely optimistic. But overall, most philosophers who are sympathetic to the analytic style of philosophy consider it better than its alternatives, and worth preserving in some form.

Since the origins of analytic philosophy in the works of Bolzano, Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein, and in the parallel movements in Austria and Poland deriving from Brentano, considerable attention has been paid to logic and language. In part this is because the logical systems developed by Frege and others were much more powerful and precise than what had gone before, and so allowed a wider range of philosophical questions to be treated in a more exact way. Under the influence of the younger Wittgenstein among others, emphasis was placed increasingly on language as the medium of philosophical theory. An unspoken assumption ran through much of this linguistic philosophizing. This was the assumption that language and world are in fundamental harmony with one another: that the categories of
being are to be investigated via the categories of language. Thus, to take a common view, names correlate to individuals, predicates to properties and relations, sentences to states of affairs. Again this principle was not adhered to in all areas, but even where the harmony was suspected not to exist, the tendency was to revise either the language to fit a philosopher’s conception of the world, or to argue from the presence of linguistic features to the existence of ontological features. So Quine, rejecting properties and modality, urged the adoption of a language without modality where abstract terms denote only sets. Conversely Strawson, noting the ubiquity of predication in natural language, argued for an Aristotelian distinction between individuals and attributes. Not all analytic philosophers accepted the harmony, for example Carnap refused to derive metaphysical conclusions from linguistic facts, but the general trend was pervasive.

It is on the face of it not obvious why language and the world should be in harmony. Of course language is a key part of the cognitive equipment that enables human beings to thrive and manipulate their environment, and for this to succeed there cannot be a total disconnect between words and world. But language presumably evolved for practical rather than theoretical purposes, and it fits first and foremost the human cognitive and agentive apparatus. Its success in enabling us to negotiate the world derives in good part from that organic embeddedness, and not from any external mystical or God-given harmony. An indirect indication is afforded by modern science, which employs methods of representation which are far removed from the language of the street. A pre-established harmony would surely have allowed physics to proceed by linguistic analysis.

There is further an internal reason why linguistic facts cannot be used to read off features of the world. This is the flexibility of semantics. In the first flush of analytic philosophy, it was simply assumed that getting the language right would deliver a correct picture of the world. The young Wittgenstein provided an anchor for this view in his picture theory of the meaning of simple sentences and his account of the extensional general form of propositions. But in the wake of the development of logical semantics by Tarski and others, it has become clear that a given language can be provided with an adequate logical and linguistic semantics in any of a number of ways, no one of which provides a uniquely compelling account of what the world must be like. This underpins both Carnap’s ontological agnosticism and Quine’s ontological relativity.

It is therefore prudent to be careful and sceptical about the extent to which linguistic features can provide us with clues as to the nature of the world. That they can do so is thanks in part to our superb evolved adaptedness but in addition to the struggles human beings have
engaged in, through the fallible and uncertain methods of science, to come to a greater understanding. In much of this history, the speculations of philosophers, whether or not they have employed analytic methods, have proved to be more of a hindrance than a help.

2 The Role of Common Sense

One of the earliest and most scrupulous of analytic philosophers, one who took unprecedented care about the meanings of the terms in which philosophical problems and disputes were formulated, was G. E. Moore. Moore accepted that the ultimate goal of philosophy was to provide a general and systematic picture of the world, but he rejected the unbridled speculations of the previous generation, and contended that philosophical theory needed to be constrained by common sense. Thus whereas Bradley had argued that all is one and is spiritual, and McTaggart had argued that time is unreal, Moore responded with the undramatic and lapidary observations that we all normally accept that there are many things in the world, that some of them are inanimate and unliving, that changes happen as time goes by, and that the majority of things in the world exist completely independently of us. Moore did not argue for these views, as philosophers typically argue. Rather he assumed them to be true and used their prosaic obviousness as a standard against which to test philosophical speculations and arguments. If Bradley argued that nothing is different from anything else, or McTaggart argued that time was unreal, then there must be something wrong with their arguments.

Moore’s methodological stance is important, and useful, but it is not unreservedly correct in all cases. Again we may take the example of science. Many of the phenomena physics covers under quantum theory are highly contrary to common sense. There is no reason, to echo the argument of the previous section, why the general opinions and expectations we form in commerce with the mesoscopic world of our acquaintance should be valid in application to parts and aspects of the world of which we have no direct experience. Some of the items Moore regarded as obviously existent are dubious, such as sense data. But the regulative role of the appeal to common sense is not impugned by the occasional exception.

In the absence of the previous methodological dependence on language, some modern analytic philosophy has arguably gone off the rails, indulging in the kind of unbridled speculation that caused Moore to appeal to common sense in the first place. Thus we find in various quarters radical epistemological relativism, solipsism, or the sceptical view that there
is no knowledge; in others we find adherence to extreme metaphysical doctrines such as idealism, monism, presentism, panpsychism, or the view that the only things that exist are pointlike simples. Such extremes had been thankfully largely absent from analytic philosophy and their resurgence is regrettable for two reasons: it threatens to restore to philosophy the bad reputation it had been struggling to throw off, and it diverts the energies of sensible philosophers into refuting cranky positions. In general then, I recommend adhering to Moore’s Principle: if a philosophical theory is in blatant contradiction with common sense, then it is overwhelmingly more likely the philosophy is wrong than that common sense is wrong, and the burden of proof is very much on the revisionary position.

3 The Position of Science

Whether philosophers like it or not, nearly all of the deep, important and often surprising things we know about the universe come not from philosophical theory but from empirical science, perhaps mankind’s most noble and valuable enterprise. Nor need we suppose there to be a fundamental opposition between philosophy and science, as was done for example by Wittgenstein, at all stages of his philosophizing. Many of the great philosophers have been great scientists: Thales, Anaximander and Empedocles in physics, Aristotle in zoology, Avicenna in medicine, Roger Bacon in optics, Descartes in physiology, Leibniz in dynamics, Adam Smith in economics, Bolzano and Frege in mathematics. Conversely, great scientists such as Newton, Hamilton, Darwin, Helmholtz, Mach, Einstein and Schrödinger have animated, enriched and rounded out their science with philosophical theory. The modern division of labour between science and philosophy may be a practical necessity but it remains a matter of theoretical regret.

There is a long history of empirical discoveries overturning established opinions supported by philosophers. Geocentrism, the four-element theory of matter, vitalism and the soul have all been swept away by empirical research. Even long-standing and intractable philosophical problems such as the nature of consciousness, the enigma of free will, or the nature of time may well in due course yield to scientific advance. At every stage there have been philosophers prepared to declare that such changes of view were a priori impossible. So the first thing philosophers should learn from science is modesty and due caution. This applies not just to such confrontations as might arise between philosophy and science. It also applies to the scientific result themselves. One thing we have learnt from Peirce and Popper is that science is perpetually revisable, as new facts come to light and old theories prove
inadequate to explain them. The fallibility of scientists and the open-endedness of scientific research stand as reminders that even the most entrenched theories can be superseded.

Obviously philosophers should not simply copy scientists and incorporate the latest results into their theories, without further reflection. That is not their job, and in any case science at the frontier is more uncertain and provisional than elsewhere. Rather philosophers should be alert to the possibility that even their most cherished views may need to be revised in the light of experience. That, rather than concern about innate capacities, is the true significance of empiricism in philosophy: empirical openness.

Nor however should the philosopher abdicate all responsibility to scientists. Some questions are too abstract or general to concern scientists: they concern the general cognitive framework and span more than one domain. It is not a scientist’s job to investigate and analyse the nature of knowledge, or the choice of ontological categories. Nor can a scientist impart for example the nature and role of negation in logic and cognition. Also, every science proceeds within certain limits that it does not go out to question. Physicists do not toy with idealism, except perhaps on Sundays; mathematicians do not usually raise the issue whether there are mathematical objects, and engineers do not reflect on the nature of artefacts in general, and scientists do not anatomize the scientific method. And that reminds us of another reason why philosophy needs to preserve its limited but real autonomy: the special sciences do give rise to and merge into very general philosophical questions. For the most part, scientists are content to leave these to be discussed by philosophers, whatever their opinion of the results. But were there no philosophers, then scientists would drift into doing amateur philosophy on their days off, or in retirement, and the results of such excursions as have been made in the past are not encouraging. The days when a single person could keep abreast of both the latest in the sciences and the best of philosophical method are long past.

4 The Primacy of Metaphysics

In the heyday of the linguistic turn, facts about language and logic were used to deliver answers to philosophical questions. There is still room for linguistic analysis. But it should be recognized for what it is: analysis of language. For example, when considering the role of surprise in science, mathematics and everyday life, we can do no better than begin by analysing what is meant by surprise. This is in part a matter of lexicography. However, it turns out that philosophers are especially good at separating out those aspects which are especially relevant for further theorizing. So in the case of surprise, perhaps the most
revealing analysis comes from an unlikely source, a partial history of astronomy in an early unpublished essay by Adam Smith. On the case of many phenomena investigated in the social sciences, such down-to-earth analysis of meanings remains indispensable.

If language and meaning are no longer taken as the key to philosophical solutions, the question remains whether any of the other philosophical subdisciplines has that kind of priority which Descartes ascribed to epistemology and Frege to logic, whereby questions in one area of philosophy are referred back to another. For example, questions in ethics were once referred back to an analysis of the meaning and use of evaluative language.

One plausible answer is that indeed no area of philosophy has claims to outright priority: any of metaphysics, epistemology, logic and other subdisciplines can on specific occasions trump all of the others, and the best policy is to seek to establish and maintain what Rawls called reflective equilibrium amongst the parts of philosophy and between philosophy, science and common sense. It is indeed hard to argue against such a proposal, not least because it leaves so much open, but within philosophy I consider we can still assign relative priority to one area, and that is metaphysics.

Metaphysics, Aristotle’s first philosophy, is about what there is. It comprises two aspects: one concerned with discerning the fundamental categories of object, and which has been known since the seventeenth century as ontology; the other is concerned with the variety of objects and the general principles governing them and their relationships, for which I appropriate the biological term systematics. Given its unsurpassable generality, metaphysics cannot proceed purely empirically. Like science, it must embody bold conjectures, theoretical speculations, which are justified at best post hoc by their success in organising and explaining the overall nature of the world and its contents. While such speculations are not my principal business here, I will simply state my own view. For want of a better word, I call it by the ambiguous term naturalism. What I mean by it is that there is nothing that is not comprised in the natural world of space, time and causality that we inhabit and act in, and which we perceive through our senses. This rules out all abstract, eternal entities, such as those of mathematical and other Platonism, immaterial souls, God, unanchored qualia, abstract propositions or concepts, and any extra-spatiotemporal deity, and any other possible but non-actual worlds. It is a parsimonious position, and is adopted not for fun, or because of a taste for desert landscapes, but because all philosophical dualisms, whether of matter and mind, temporal and eternal, or abstract and concrete, engender insoluble problems concerning the relations and interactions between the various domains. For this reason I call my naturalism a “no magic” position.
Whether this particular conjecture is accepted or not, a philosopher, and by implication anyone else, can only truly work with the entities that are there. If there are no souls, or immaterial qualia, then an account of conscious experience must be sought that dispenses with them. Whether the problem is hard or not is not the issue. We are not here for fun. If nature can manage to produce organisms having phenomenal sensations from the building blocks of matter, then in our theorizing we had better respect this, even if we are driven to use language that goes beyond that required to describe the building blocks themselves. A lack of ontological dualisms or genuine ontological emergence entails neither epistemic nor linguistic monism: language and reality can be discrepant from one another, as we stressed in the first section. In other words, naturalism as a metaphysical conjecture does not entail physicalism as a linguistic imperative.

The reason that ontology takes priority over linguistic analysis is that we are interested, as philosophers and as language-using cognitive beings in general, in truth, and truth is ultimately answerable to reality. For some truths, the most basic ones, the reason for their truth is to be found not among other truths, which would if generalized provoke a regress, but because of what there is in the world. A basic truths is true because something exists, a truthmaker for that truth. What there is determines what is true. Of course our knowledge of what there is and what we take to be true have to combine in the right way, but that is all part of the cognitive enterprise. Some truths do not require truthmakers, but without objects to make some truths true, there would be no truths at all. ‘There is at least one truth’ is an existential truth and its truth requires there to be something – a truth. But truths in general are not just true because they exist (though this may be the case for analytic truths and a few other self-referential ones), but rather because of something else, having to do with what they are about. The more general truth ‘Something exists’, entailed by ‘There is at least one truth’, can only be true if there is something (rather than nothing), and any such something serves to make that truth true. So if something is true, something exists, and there is a truthmaker.

Naturally it is the business of ontology to figure out what kinds of things exist, and method on its own will not help us: we need the inputs of as many sources of knowledge, speculation and conjecture as we can, to provide data. This will help us to establish, as an ongoing concern, what are the fundamental categories of thing. Like philosophy in general, this task can no longer be consigned simply to the philosophy of language and logic, as it was for Aristotle or Kant, but must be worked for by a complex and incomplete process of trial and adjustment. But without the attempt to discover the most basic kinds, systematics, the remainder of metaphysics, cannot get properly started.
Taking metaphysics to have overall priority within philosophy is of course not a new or original position: it originated in Aristotle, though like much else in his thought it was presaged by the pre-Socratics and Plato. It was urged against Husserl's epistemicism by Ingarden, and practised instinctively by Whitehead. In our time, fellow travellers along this road include not only my Manchester contemporaries Kevin Mulligan and Barry Smith, but also David Armstrong, Michael Devitt, John Heil, and Jonathan Lowe.

5 Aspiring to System

From Aristotle to Hegel, philosophers aspired to system, to a comprehensive view and account of the world. Where they could not fill in gaps from reliable sources of knowledge, they had resource to abstraction, generalization and speculation. In this they were, as it turns out, simply paving the way for later natural science, which does just that, though usually in a more restrained way. The difference between metaphysics and the special sciences was made clear by Aristotle: the special sciences deal with a domain, part or aspect of being, whereas metaphysics deals with everything, from the fundamental forces of nature to the intricacies of Baroque counterpoint, from DNA to the imagery of James Joyce, from covalent bonds to corporate bonds. Of course metaphysics is not encyclopedic, it aspires to completeness of domain but eschews detail for categorial assignment and assessment of the mode of existence (or lack of existence) of its objects.

Analytic philosophy, which evolved out of widespread dismay at the wild speculations and grandiose syntheses of German idealism, long shunned the drive to system. But there are two reasons to think that piecemeal analysis cannot be the final story. The first is that by their nature philosophical theories tend to grow across disciplinary boundaries, so that theoretical choices in one area determine and constrain choices in another. The other is that the whole aim of metaphysics is synoptic: to bring together, as far as we can manage it, all our knowledge into a coherent, logical, adequate and applicable whole, in terms of which everything we experience can find its appropriate place. Anything less than this, even if it is only aspired to as a regulative ideal, is a betrayal of the task of metaphysics. If philosophers do not attempt it, the field will be left for those with fewer scruples and less caution.

The key to system is a comprehensive and interlocking set of categories, in terms of which all elements find a place: hence the central importance of ontology. This is why the once fashionable analytic study of local conceptual geography, “investigating the logic of X”, for arbitrary X, can at best be an interim and instrumental activity. The investigation of
categories was long ignored in analytic philosophy, because it was assumed that alongside local conceptual geography, a combination of logical semantics and set theory would suffice to replace the traditional concern of philosophers with matters of classification. But there were good reasons for the tradition, and the peculiarities of set theory as a mathematical discipline, along with the plurality of semantics mentioned above, meant that the neglect of classification was deleterious for philosophy, and indeed more widely. When large databases computerized databases were first developed, the information scientists designing them, used to mathematically and logically inspired computer programming languages, employed classification systems that were radically inadequate to capture the intricacies of the domains for which the data were kept. The mischief such work did is only now being gradually rectified, in part by recourse to the requirements of representing common sense knowledge, in part by the disciplined imposition of philosophically designed ontology.

Fortunately for philosophers, interest in classification as a scientific tool did not die, but persisted elsewhere, in disciplines for which adequate taxonomy is not a luxury but a dire necessity, namely library science and biological systematics. Both of these disciplines, different as they are, came up with variants of a single solution for coping with the complexities of classifying items with an astonishing range of variation: documents and organisms respectively. The solution lay in what librarians call facets and what biologists call characters. These are nothing magical, simply common features that can combine in many ways, and provide the materials for classifying a range of entities from below rather than imposing a top-down taxonomic scheme. Adapting the same approach in ontology, I call these common features factors. It turns out that factors are not unknown in philosophical category theory, being present in the different schemes of Empedocles, Aristotle, Kant, and most systematically, Ingarden. By discerning limits to the combinability of factors, ontology can in principle lay out the palette of alternatives that actual entities can inhabit across all domains, and so provide the conceptual framework for a systematic inventory of the world. How this should happen in detail is not our concern here: we merely stress that it should be possible, and that a factored ontology may be the best way to pursue the ideal of systematization.

6 Philosophy and the Armchair

One respect in which philosophy, whether analytic, phenomenological or traditional, is often said to differ from other disciplines is that it is, at least in good part, a priori, and that as a
result its deliverances are immune to refutation or revision through experience. Along with this has gone the idea that philosophy must employ a method of a radically different type from the sciences. This at least has been the standard view since the development of natural science in the seventeenth century. In Descartes it took the form of the cogito, in Locke and Kant the form of an examination of the machinery of cognition, in Brentano and Husserl a description of the structure of consciousness, in Russell, Wittgenstein and Carnap some kind of logical and/or linguistic analysis, in Collingwood and Strawson the description of our most basic conceptual machinery.

The eagerness with which philosophers have embraced new methods has several motivations. One is simply the desire to demarcate themselves clearly from those engaged in empirical science. While few have gone so far as Spinoza in imagining philosophy could proceed according to the axiomatic method, many have hoped to carve out for themselves a niche that scientific discovery and upheaval could not touch. So Husserl’s insistence that phenomenology deal with the essences of things and not just their accidental manifestations was intended to ensure that philosophy remain above the sciences. Another motivation was to provide the sciences with an unshakable epistemological foundation, and at the same time to cure philosophy of its disappointingly perpetual discord. We see this equally in Descartes and in his admirers Brentano and Husserl, but also in Kant and the search for synthetic a priori principles governing knowledge. Finally in various manifestations of linguistic analytic philosophy, from Russell to Davidson and Dummett, we find the drive to understand how words mean and language works, as offering a specifically philosophical lever with which to understand the world and our place in it. Again and again, the proponents of this or that philosophical method have claimed that it will finally raise philosophy to the status of a strict science, and that properly applied, it will enable intersubjective testing of philosophical claims and put doleful disagreements behind us. Again and again, such attempts have come to nothing, as the philosophers have squabbled about the methods and their applications just as much as they ever did about what the methods were intended to reveal.

All such attempts are vain. As we indicated, philosophy and science leak into one another. There is no unshakable epistemological bedrock: the best we can hope for is Moore’s general confidence that things are broadly as they seem to be, and that as science advances we gradually get a better picture of reality. And most importantly, there is no magic key to unlock a special kind of truth or domain of substantive knowledge that is forever immune to revision. There are necessary truths, logical and analytic, turning on the meanings of logical particles and lexical items. They are a concomitant effect of having meaningful
language at all, but they reveal nothing deep about the world, unexpected and surprising though they sometimes turn out to be. Even the often amazing results of pure mathematics plumb the intricacies of the logical interconnections among formal concepts rather than being revelatory of a special layer of reality. They are the preserve of mathematicians, and of interest to philosophers not more than are the results of empirical investigation.

Many of the more fantastic speculations of philosophers, from ancient to contemporary, have flown in the face of common sense precisely because philosophers have convinced themselves they are in possession of a method that guarantees them access to a special kind of truth, one that can face down the more mundane claims of the everyday. Reporting from the armchair, they claim to know the world *must* be this way rather than that. The history of philosophy however is a graveyard strewn with the corpses of once fashionable theories proclaimed in great optimism and utter conviction. It is about time we drew a lesson from this history, modified our expectations, and learnt from the lesson of science that even our most cherished theoretical beliefs can be mistaken.

Lacking any magic key, philosophical method has to be pluralistic, eclectic, and above all, balanced. It must balance simplicity with adequacy, speculative adventurousness with commonsense sobriety, linguistic care with a readiness to embrace representational innovation, ambition of aim with modesty of expectation. Above all, it must be open, and perpetually prepared for revision, from whatever quarter. This is not a dramatic or sexy message to convey to those with a yearning for certainty, or looking for quick and easy insight into an esoteric layer of being. Against this however, it may have the advantage of being correct.