

Analysis, Schmanalysis

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September 13, 2006[†]

Abstract

In *Naming and Necessity*, Saul Kripke employs a handy philosophical trick: he invents the term ‘schmidentity’ to argue indirectly for his favored account of identity. Kripke says in a footnote that he wishes someday “to elaborate on the utility of this device”. In this paper, I first take up a general elaboration on his behalf. I then apply the trick to support an attractive but somewhat unorthodox picture of conceptual analysis—one according to which it is a process of forming intentions for word use. This picture can recover a naturalistically respectable notion of the philosopher’s task, and can help resolve current debates that turn on the place of conceptual analysis.

A widely held view in current philosophical theory says to be wary of conceptual analysis and its quest for analyticity. The major source of this suspicion traces back to reasons W. V. Quine gave 50 years ago in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”—namely concerns about reliance on notions of meaning and synonymy that are unclear.¹ Since that time, there have been new sources of suspicion. In the philosophy of mind, for example, debates over consciousness have some philosophers doubting whether conceptual analysis can furnish as hefty a metaphysical conclusion as the denial of physicalism.² And in epistemology, Stephen Stich and others worry that conceptual analysis of epistemic norms can only end up endorsing local intuitions about good thinking—intuitions that depend arbitrarily on the culture in which they were formed.³

Philosophical *practice*, on the other hand, apparently has (let’s face it) philosophers doing something like conceptual analysis for a living.⁴ We wish to learn more about

*Thanks to Marc Alspecter-Kelly, David Chalmers, Eric Lormand, Stephen Martin, Ashley McDowell, Peter Railton, Jason Stanley, and two anonymous reviewers for comments on drafts.

[†]Draft version: *schmanalysis.tex*, v6.15

¹Quine (1951).

²Chalmers (1996), Block and Stalnaker (1999). Some treat this methodological point as a debate over modal intuitions, and not conceptual analysis. But Jerry Fodor plausibly suggests in Fodor (2004) that, ever since Kripke, the former is just the latter dressed up in what looks to be more metaphysically respectable clothes.

³See, for example, Stich (1990). Related worries are in Miller (2000) (which opens with the bold claim that “analytic philosophy is over”), and the anthology DePaul and Ramsey (1998). Some put the same worry in terms of doubts about the methodology of wide reflective equilibrium.

⁴As it happens, Jerry Fodor makes a similar point in the paper previously mentioned.

important things like justice, truth, and freedom, but it seems the only way toward finding out what these are is by paying at least some careful attention to our own concepts of these things. The resulting tension between theory and practice is a bit uncomfortable.

Part of the problem is that no one seems sure what “conceptual analysis” is, or what it is for a sentence to be an “analyticity”. In this paper I argue for a surprising theory of conceptual analysis, according to which it is a process of forming intentions for using our words. The argument relies on an old, but illuminating, philosophical trick—and so I turn first to a discussion of that trick.

1 The trick

You might already have a guess, from the title of this paper, about which trick I mean; perhaps the most famous instance is in Saul Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity*. In the beginning of Lecture III, Kripke wishes to dismiss the theory of identity according to which it is a relation between names in English. He gives away the term ‘identity’ to those who buy this theory, and invents the term ‘schmididentity’ for the relation of interest to him (the one that holds “only between an object and itself”). He then argues that his opponents’ relation is a less interesting one than that for which he uses ‘schmididentity’, since it fails to solve any of the problems it was meant to solve, and is less intuitive to boot. He concludes that his opponents’ account of identity “should be dropped, and identity should just be taken to be the relation between a thing and itself.” Kripke says of this trick that it “can be used for a number of philosophical problems,” and adds in a footnote that “I hope to elaborate on the utility of this device of imagining a hypothetical language elsewhere.” He does later elaborate some on this trick the next time he employs it, in his (1977) paper.⁵ His discussion underestimates the applicability of the trick, however; similar tricks have been applied much more widely than in the specific circumstances he proposes.⁶ It is the most general version of the trick that I now examine.

1.1 The recipe

Here, then, is a recipe for running the general version of the trick. Suppose that Aya and Bernardo disagree over the denotation of a term t . Presumably this is because Aya and Bernardo have different background theories of some sort about that to which t refers.⁷ So let’s say more precisely that Aya thinks t should be used to denote what it

⁵On p. 16, emphasis as in original: “I propose the following test for any alleged counterexample to a linguistic proposal: If someone alleges that a certain linguistic phenomenon in English is a counterexample to a given analysis, consider a hypothetical language which (as much as possible) is like English except that the analysis is *stipulated* to be correct. Imagine such a hypothetical language introduced into a community and spoken by it. *If the phenomenon in question would still arise in a community that spoke such a hypothetical language (which may not be English), then the fact that it arises in English cannot disprove the hypothesis that the analysis is correct for English.*”

⁶Just for example, there is a pre-Kripkean instance of the trick in Ullian (1961). It is more typical in philosophical discussion than in written work.

⁷Perhaps they take these theories implicitly to define or otherwise constrain the meaning of t in something like the Ramsey-Lewis way; see Lewis (1970).

implicitly would as used in theory T_a , while Bernardo thinks it should denote as in the incompatible theory T_b . The theories (and their attendant implications for t) overlap enough to be competitors for the term.

Here is how Aya would pull the trick I want to examine:

1. She agrees for the sake of argument to use t as in Bernardo's theory T_b .
2. She invents a new term t' that she stipulates is to be used as according to her preferred T_a .
3. She shows, using the uncontroversial term t' , that T_a is a superior theory to the rival T_b .
4. She claims that therefore we may as well use the original t as in T_a after all.

Again, this is a more general formulation than Kripke intended. Nevertheless, it is instances of this formulation that I will defend.

1.2 The objection

Only one step in this recipe seems at all objectionable: step 4, where Aya claims we "might as well" use the term in question as in her preferred theory. (Step 1 may seem a bit disingenuous, of course, but that is only because of step 4. And performing step 3 will naturally involve a deal of controversy, but the practice of arguing that one theory is superior to another is not itself a controversial thing to do.)

If challenged, Aya could defend step 4 in this way: suppose we stubbornly kept using t as in T_b . Given that theory T_a is superior to the incompatible theory T_b , the latter will fall out of use, and t with it. Meanwhile T_a will be burdened with the cumbersome neologism t' . We should forsake this burden, and allow t to be used as in T_a , since it is no longer of any apparent cost in ambiguity to do so. After all, T_a and T_b had enough in common that it was a going possibility from the beginning that T_a might have been the correct theory to associate with t .

Bernardo might argue in response that words do not always track our theoretical whims; the fact that we find one theory superior to another could be independent of *semantic* facts. Even though Bernardo might come around to a consensus that T_a is better than the incompatible T_b , he may have an independent theory of semantic facts according to which t means what it does in T_b .

Notice, though, that such a response flies in the face of standard philosophical practice. We typically take it for granted that reasons for using a term a certain way simultaneously illuminate *the* meaning of the term. Consider the term 'person', for example. Philosophers since at least Locke have agreed that people can be non-human, and humans can be non-people. We find this distinction useful and philosophically illuminating. Suppose now that Bernardo's chosen semantic theory gives a meaning of 'person' according to which all possible people are humans, and all possible humans are people. Must we respond to this purported delivery of the semantic facts with disappointment, and glumly use 'schmerson' when speaking of the notion to which we've become attached? It seems unlikely we are that helpless when it comes to the use of our own words. Such a result would typically be taken as evidence against

Bernardo's semantic theory, and not against our preferred usage. In other words, we take the semantic theory's failure to respect such an important distinction as evidence that it's not right about what 'person' means. In effect, then, standard philosophical practice takes the meaning of 'person' to be determined by such interests.

But if this line of argument is unconvincing to those wedded to some or other semantic theory, the trickster can simply jettison step 4, and continue to use t' instead in the way that all sides find more interesting. We might call steps 1–3 the “weak” version of the trick, and proceeding to reassimilate the original term t we might call the “strong” version. Applying the weak version would sometimes feel a bit ridiculous, I suspect—regularly using neologisms like ‘schmerson’—but at least then we could all talk about the things we find interesting, without anyone feeling guilty for betraying their favored semantic theory.

2 Analysis, schmanalysis

Now, as I suggested earlier, I have a particular theory of conceptual analysis. Of course I recognize that you might not share this view; I suppose we all have our cherished theories, or at least favorite guesses. For now, I suggest we put aside these differences; you may use the contested terms however you like. I'd like instead to discuss a practice I'll call “schmanalysis”, and its cognate notion “schmanalyticity”.

2.1 Schmanalysis

Schmanalysis of a term t is the process of deciding upon the best possible theory one wishes to associate with t , all things considered. Some considerations for how to choose a theory for t will include the term's history of use and current entrenchment, the theory's theoretical or practical fruitfulness, and the like. When we come to believe theory T is the best to associate with t , we would likely then form intentions to use t as in T ; we might announce such intentions by saying things like ‘theory T is correct for t ’, or ‘ t refers to the thing with properties ϕ ’. Such statements are *schmanalytic* for those who have formed such intentions. Thus schmanalysis is a process for determining how best to use words, and schmanalytic sentences are ones that *express the intention* of a speaker or community to use the words as determined in the schmanalysis.

Naturally I'm free to stipulate my use of ‘schmanalysis’ as I please, but you may wonder if the notion for which I wish to use it is an interesting one. Well, one intriguing feature of schmanalyticities is that they're plausibly *a priori*. At least, as statements of intentions, they are in the same boat with “I hereby intend to raise my hand.” Whether or not such intention-statements are actually *a priori*, we do have some kind of strong justification for them that seems independent of empirical considerations.

Though plausibly *a priori*, schmanalyticities are also defeasible. ‘Knowledge is justified true belief’ was probably schmanalytic for A. J. Ayer; that is, he had the intention to use the word ‘knowledge’ that way, since he thought it the best way. Upon reading Edmund Gettier's 1963 paper, though, Ayer could have changed his intentions for the use of ‘knowledge’. (He didn't, in fact, but he could have.) If he had, his earlier statement would no longer express a schmanalyticity, in virtue of his changed

intentions. Though all schmanalyticities are in principle defeasible this way, some will be more robust than others. A better schmanalysis for the term at hand would result in a more robust schmanalyticity, and in the limit, an ideally rational schmanalysis would result in a practically indefeasible schmanalyticity. (This is given the reasonable presumption that our intentions are always to do things in what appears to be the best way.)

Schmanalysis is also a guilt-free practice; unlike analysis (on the usual understanding), philosophers can indulge in schmanalysis without anxiety about metaphysical commitment to meanings and synonymy. The goal of a schmanalyst is simply to evaluate rival theories for a term and pick one over the others given reasons available. There also need be no worry about emptiness of schmanalyticities, as there once was for analyticities. Gilbert Harman points out that it can be a trick question to ask a philosopher “is your claim analytic or synthetic?” If analytic, it is vacuous or stipulational, and thus uninteresting; if synthetic, it is a matter for the scientists.⁸ After careful schmanalysis, in contrast, a philosopher can proudly assert her newly-formed schmanalyticity, for it will be no more empty than any other carefully-weighted decision about what to do. In the context of schmanalysis, a claim like “knowledge is justified true belief” should sound like an ethical decision such as “I shall save the baby.” Both express decisions to do something (save the baby, use ‘knowledge’ that way)—decisions ideally based on reasons.

And though they don’t require a commitment to meanings, schmanalyticities *do* reflect intuitive differences in language use, since one plausible way to individuate languages is by the intentions of the speakers involved. For example someone for whom it is schmanalytic that ‘knowledge is justified true belief’ is probably speaking a slightly different language from the person for whom it isn’t. This coheres with our intuition that ‘knowledge’ means something different to the two speakers in such a case. To the extent that speakers share intentions to use words the same way, they are speaking the same language. Statements can be schmanalytic for an idiolect quite obviously and easily. To be schmanalytic for a community of language-speakers, though, would require a group intention. On reflection it shouldn’t be too surprising that a theory of group agency could be needed to make sense of shared language use.

Schmanalysis can also play useful roles in unraveling some current philosophical tangles; let me pause to outline two such cases. Sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.2 can safely be skipped if their respective debates do not interest you.

2.1.1 Schmanalysis and consciousness

Much of the recent hand-wringing over conceptual analysis has been a result of the debate over consciousness. Consider as indicative the exchange between Block and Stalnaker (1999) and Chalmers and Jackson (2001) on the topic. According to the camp of Chalmers and Jackson, conceptual analysis is crucial to the debate over whether consciousness is a purely physical phenomenon. Block and Stalnaker’s party, on the other hand, argue that only standard scientific methodology—such as inference to the simplest explanation—can make such a call. Block and Stalnaker say that what we

⁸Harman (1996). Hume, of course, poses a similar dilemma for the metaphysician.

consider to be possible about consciousness

... is informed not only by our concepts, but by implicit and explicit theories and general methodological principles that we have absorbed through our scientific culture—by everything that the “we” who are performing these thought experiments believe.⁹

The debate turns on whether important identity claims are justified on “methodological” or “conceptual” grounds.¹⁰ If on conceptual grounds, then it seems we could assert now, simply by consulting our concepts, that no physical story will be enough to entail a story about consciousness. If on methodological grounds, then the jury is still out while our nascent cognitive theories mature. Chalmers’ and Jackson’s emphasis on conceptual analysis has the advantage of explaining how, when we do scientific theorizing, we at some point recognize what it is we’ve been theorizing about. We eventually need to say, after learning a lot about H₂O, that that’s what water *is*. This identification doesn’t happen by “magic”, as Jackson would say;¹¹ it requires analyzing our concepts. On the other hand, Block and Stalnaker have the advantage of explaining the intuition that we cannot pull major, definitive conclusions about consciousness—ones to which ever-advancing cognitive science seems awfully relevant—out of a conceptual hat. The result seems to be a philosophical standoff.

There is no such standoff between *schmanalysis* and purely scientific considerations, however. To do conceptual schmanalysis just is to compare theories to associate with a term. The preference of one theory over another is, when rational, on familiar methodological grounds like simplicity and other such explanatory virtues. When we schmanalyze a concept like [consciousness], we are both showing how to recognize an application of the concept (through an implicit declaration of intention to apply it in certain circumstances), and at the same time applying all the relevant methodological considerations at hand. When the methodological considerations are indeterminate, so (if rational) will be our intentions to apply the concept, and so will be our schmanalysis. A good conceptual schmanalyst wishes to associate the *best* theory with a concept, and so would hesitate to declare schmanalyticities that look to be hostage to associated scientific theories in their mere infancy.

2.1.2 Schmanalysis and epistemic diversity

Another comparatively recent source of concern over the place of conceptual analysis is in epistemology—to do particularly with anxiety about the place of intuitions in philosophical theorizing. Consider the discussion in Stich (1990) as indicative of this issue. There Stich defines “analytic epistemology” as “any epistemological project that takes the choice between competing justificational rules or competing criteria of rightness to turn on conceptual or linguistic analysis.”¹² And in that project, he says, “something has gone very wrong,” because

⁹Block and Stalnaker (1999) p. 43. Note that we are talking about what is “possible” for consciousness in the sense of Chalmers’ “primary intension”, or what Gareth Evans would call “deeply possible”—the sense in which it possible that water is not H₂O.

¹⁰Block and Stalnaker (1999) p. 24–25.

¹¹Jackson (1994) p. 42 n. 25.

¹²Stich (1990) p. 91.

the analytic epistemologist's effort is designed to determine whether our cognitive states and processes accord with our commonsense notion of justification (or some other commonsense concept of epistemic evaluation). Yet surely the evaluative epistemic concepts embedded in everyday thought and language are every bit as likely as the cognitive processes they evaluate to be culturally acquired and to vary from culture to culture.¹³

For this reason, Stich sees little point in the analysis of philosophical concepts; the concepts we analyze are merely “arbitrary and idiosyncratic” and “there is no obvious virtue that distinguishes our concepts from the alternatives.”¹⁴

This concern cannot apply to the *schmanalysis* of our concepts, however. Let us grant that our naive, commonsense, intuitive intentions for using some term from normative epistemology are often arbitrary and idiosyncratic. (I suspect this is granting too much, myself, but nevermind.) It is in the nature of schmanalysis to examine such intentions, considering whether there are good reasons to maintain them or to revise them for something better. If you have not considered reasons for your intentions, then (by my stipulative definition) you have not performed schmanalysis. If on the other hand you have considered reasons for your intentions, then they cannot be wholly arbitrary. It is therefore in the nature of schmanalysis that its results are not arbitrary or idiosyncratic. Schmanalysis does not enshrine current practice, commonsense judgments, and cultural idiosyncrasies; it only treats them as a starting place. Upon encountering alternative ways to use terms like ‘justification’, the schmanalyst must provide reasons for preferring one over the other. A responsible schmanalyst will actively seek out such alternatives.

Presumably then, Stich would have no objection to conceptual schmanalysis of epistemic norms. After all, he is doing such schmanalysis himself when he proposes how we should evaluate thinking. For example, his positive chapter includes assertions like “our account of cognitive virtue should be a *consequentialist* account.”¹⁵ With such sentences Stich implicitly announces his considered intentions for applying phrases like ‘cognitive virtue’—he will not apply such evaluations without reference to consequences, and he hopes to sway us with reasons toward similar intentions. This is not conceptual analysis, by his lights, but it *is* conceptual schmanalysis.

2.2 Analysis

For these reasons and more, I think schmanalysis and schmanalyticities are notions worth pursuing. It may not surprise you that I'll go one step further: reasons like those summarized above convince me that we should use ‘analysis’ and ‘analyticity’ for these notions. They capture much of what we hope for from such phrases, without carrying the stigma currently attached to them.

Like any instance of the trick, you might resist my proposal for ‘analysis’ in either of these two different ways:

¹³Stich (1990) p. 92.

¹⁴Stich (1990) p 94.

¹⁵Stich (1990) p. 130, emphasis his. Incidentally I have little bone to pick with his pragmatic epistemology—in large part I agree with his schmanalysis.

1. You might think that in general the trick is a legitimate philosophical move, but find my specific proposal for ‘analysis’ to be insufficiently interesting in this case.
2. You might think that this application of the trick is illegitimate—that though the notion for which I’d like to use ‘analysis’ is a good one, it is not up to us to use the word the way we’d like.

I’ll respond to each of these in turn.

Pressing only the former objection is inherently awkward. Such an objector accepts the trick, and so agrees that we are free to use ‘analysis’ in the way we find most interesting. She just does not find the notion I have put forward to be sufficiently interesting. But of course in accepting the trick and considering which theory to associate with ‘analysis’, she is engaging in exactly the activity that she claims to be uninteresting. In neutral terms, she is doing schmanalysis in order to denounce the practice of schmanalysis. This is not a contradictory position exactly, but it should be an uncomfortable one. For example, if schmanalysis is uninteresting, then presumably the stakes involved in it are low—high-stakes activities are always interesting. But then her own schmanalysis must be a low-stakes activity. If by her own lights the objector’s schmanalysis is a mere trifle, it’s hard to see why we shouldn’t just disregard it.

Perhaps the objector *does* think schmanalysis is an interesting activity—that it’s a good idea to work out how we’d most like to use words—but she doesn’t think ‘analysis’ is the right word for that activity. Then she is really rejecting a presumption of the trick, and so taking the latter of the two options above. According to this objection, we can’t use ‘analysis’ in the way we think best tracks our interests. To this objection I have little more to say. Suppose for example that past usage weighs in heavily for the competing analysis of ‘analysis’ that has to do with sameness of meaning. Well first, I should mention that I think such an intuition could be accommodated—as a “Meaning, Schmeaning” paper could be sufficient to show.¹⁶ But even if it couldn’t be accommodated, why should we be so wedded to past usage, if it turns out (as Quine taught us so long ago) that the past usage of ‘analysis’ is messy and unhelpful?

If this line of argument is not convincing, though, I’m not entirely crestfallen. Of course one may (I think stubbornly) continue to use ‘analysis’ for a notion agreed to be muddled or uninteresting. With such an interlocutor, I recommend foregoing the contentious word completely, and concentrating on *schmanalysis* instead.

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¹⁶I suggested in section 1.2 that when a semantic theory clashes with our theoretical and practical interests for the use of a term, then we take it as so much the worse for that semantic theory. This seems to imply that any correct semantic theory will line up with such interests—that, indeed, the meaning of a term is *determined* by such interests. It would be difficult to argue (on grounds of philosophical interest *etc.*) for a meaning of ‘meaning’ that dictates otherwise!

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