

Chapter Nineteen

Descriptions, Prescriptions and the Limits of Knowledge

Abstract: The limits of human knowledge are summarized. Prescriptions, which are not knowable, include: (1) stipulative definitions, (2) the axioms, vocabulary, syntax, and inference rules in formal deductive systems, (3) 'sufficient evidence' assertions, and (4) ethical assertions. In contrast, descriptions that are knowable include (1) empirical statements, (2) true-in-a-language sentences and applied mathematical-deductive entailments, (3) reportive definitions, (4) theoretic definitions, (5) aesthetic assertions, and (6) social science theories. J.L. Austin's (1975) notion of a 'performative' utterance and the 'declarative-interrogative-imperative' distinction are discussed. The contemporary state of 'philosophical specialization' is criticized. Twenty-eight (28) questions are posed.

In this chapter, I summarize the limits of human knowledge. The definitions of 'description' and 'prescription' are repeated below:

A '**description**' is an assertion that purports to express a correspondence (or a representation) of some state of affairs, where its correctness (or incorrectness) is independent of its acceptance (or non-acceptance) by particular persons.

A '**prescription**' is an assertion that purports to express a stipulation (or rule) upon a practice, where its correctness (or incorrectness) is dependent upon its acceptance (or non-acceptance) by particular persons.

These definitions are intended to be objectively *true* theoretic definitions. A theoretic definition is correct (i.e., true) only if its definiens accurately describes the phenomena (e.g., object, entity) being defined. The descriptive-prescriptive distinction represents an *objective epistemic-semantic feature* of the world about what persons can *know* and *mean*. The major conclusion in this book is that empirical assertions are knowable (chapters one through four), while moral assertions are not knowable (chapter five).¹ The other chapters have focused on the role of prescriptions in other areas of discourse.

¹ To briefly summarize the first five chapters: Chapter one theorizes a predominately externalist (PE) definition of 'knowledge' that states the conditions for *when* knowledge is obtained (and when it is not obtained). Chapter two addresses radical skepticism and (the fact) that I cannot know that I-am-not-a-disembodied-brain-in-a-chemical-vat. Chapter three solves the skeptical regress-of-reasons problem, claiming that assertions of what constitutes 'sufficient evidence' to know **p**, terminates in a person-dependent *prescriptive* mode, but that this fact doesn't harm our ability to possess the necessary and sufficient conditions for having knowledge. Chapter four addresses Hume's problem of induction and concludes that persons can be 'personally justified' in believing that 'the past will resemble the future,' but cannot have a truth-connecting 'justified belief' about this proposition because there are no non-circular arguments to defend this belief. Chapter five introduces metaethical prescriptivism that maintains ethical assertions may be approved (or disapproved) by humans, but that they are neither true nor false.

In conjunction with the theoretical definitions of 'description' and 'prescription,' I suggest that the following definitions of 'objectivity' are stipulations that are consistent with the descriptive-prescriptive distinction, the correspondence theory of truth, and ordinary linguistic usage and belief:

A description is **objectively true** if it expresses a correspondence (or a representation) of some state of affairs that is independent of its acceptance (or acknowledgment) by particular persons.

A description is **objectively false** if it doesn't correspond to; or represent a state of affairs.

I contend that these stipulated formalized definitions are the best precise characterizations (i.e., explication) of our normal conception of 'objectivity.'

Prescriptions are Not Knowable

I. Stipulative Definitions Are Prescriptions

A '*stipulative definition*' introduces a specialized definiens for a definiendum. This occurs in one of the following three contexts: (a) the initial naming of an entity where the entity is newly-discovered, newly-introduced, newly-created, or newly-renamed, or (b) in the notational abbreviation of one linguistic expression for another (meaningful) linguistic expression, or (c) in a precise formalization where a reportive definiendum-to-definiens relation is generally affirmed but a definiens alteration (or explication) is proposed for pragmatic, technical, or personal reasons.²

The tripartite theory of definition is a hypothesis about how persons can specify (or assert) the use of a linguistic symbol. In chapter six, it was concluded that stipulative definitions are *prescriptions*, and not descriptions as are 'reportive' and 'theoretic':

A '*reportive definition*' (or 'lexical definition,' 'nominal definition') reports or describes the generally accepted or community equivalence between a definiendum and a definiens.

A '*theoretic definition*' (or 'real definition,' 'natural definition,') affirms the standard equivalence between a definiendum and a definiens, but represents an attempt to analyze the 'nature' or 'associated material conditions' of the entity being discussed.

² When discussing formal deductive models, some philosophers have stated that a model's *stipulative definitions* are '*true by convention*'. This locution can lead to a *serious misconception*. To believe that a 'stipulative definition' can be either *true* or *false* is a major epistemic error.

II. The Axioms and Definitions of Measurement Systems are Prescriptions

In chapter seven it was argued that the primitive symbols, definitions, axioms, grammar, and rules of inference, found in formal deductive systems are introduced as *prescriptions*. In chapters seven, nine, ten, and twelve important metaphysical and semantic axioms (e.g., law of identity, law of bivalence, and compositionality) were interpreted as prescriptions. Deductive systems are often introduced with the purpose of measurement (e.g., physical space is measured in geometry, quantity in arithmetic, valid arguments in deductive logic). Whether one measurement system is better than others depend upon whether it helps us better understand or quantify the domain involved.³

The Role of Axioms and Definitions in Economics as Prescriptions

In chapter seven, a 'game formalism' theory of mathematics was proposed where the following definition of 'axiom' was proposed:

An '**axiom**' is an independent foundational prescriptive assertion that underlies a set of stipulative definitions; including the vocabulary, grammar-syntax, and inference rules that measure a specified domain. Axioms cannot be deduced from other sentences in a formal system. An axiom is typically (but not always) adopted if it helps map (or represent) the physical world (or linguistic discourse) in a fruitful way.

With respect to the pragmatic purpose of measurement, it should also be observed that within the discipline of Economics, that semi-descriptive assumptions (viz. stipulations, postulates) also play a prominent role in theory construction. In responding to the question in the title of his essay "Are General Equilibrium Theories Explanatory?" (1984) Daniel M. Hausman presents eight 'lawlike' assertions behind general equilibrium theories, based upon the following definition of 'economic equilibrium':

³ Evidence supporting the proposition that measurement systems are constructed by persons (and not discovered as objectively true) include the fact of alternative systems of measurement for identical domains. Three examples come to mind. That there evolved a 'metric system' using centimeters, decimeters, meters, and kilometers, and (at the same time) a 'weights and measurement system' using inches, feet, yards, and miles as standard units indicates that these systems have different (prescriptive) axioms and definitions. Similarly, that there is a Fahrenheit and Celsius scale for measuring temperature is evidence that the axioms that underlie these two systems are neither true nor false, nor contradict each other. In contemporary physics, assertions (within quantum mechanics) can be equally-well stated with an ontology of either 'particles' or 'waves.'

‘Economic equilibrium’ is a state of affairs where there is no excess demand: a state of affairs in which at the going prices nobody wants to go on exchanging.

From this stipulated fixed definiens concept, eight statements of an ‘equilibrium theory’ are described as the basis of neo-classical economics (p. 345):

- (1) For any individual **S** and any two options **x** and **y**, one and only one of the following is true: **S** prefers **x** to **y**, **S** prefers **y** to **x**, **S** is indifferent between **y** and **x**.
- (2) **S**’s preferences among options are transitive.
- (3) **S** seeks to maximize his or her utility where the utility of an option **x** is greater than the utility of an option **y** for **S** and if and only if **S** prefers **x** to **y**. The utilities of options are equal just in case the agent is indifferent between them.
- (4) If option **x** is acquiring commodity bundle **x**’ and option **y** is acquiring commodity bundle **y**’ and **y**’ contains at least as much of the commodity as **x**’ and more of at least one commodity, then all agents prefer **y** to **x**.
- (5) The marginal utility of a commodity **c** to an agent **S** is a decreasing function of the quantity **c** that **S** has.
- (6) When we increase any input into production, other things being equal, output increase, but, after a certain point, at a decreasing rate.
- (7) Increasing all the inputs into production in the same proportion increases output by that proportion. The production set is weakly convex and additive.
- (8) Entrepreneurs or firms attempt to maximize their profits.

Replacing any one of (1) – (8) with a non-equivalent generalization would count itself as a theory change. Most economists would concede (1) – (8) are not literally true (p. 356), and that these statements don’t exhaust the ‘laws’ of microeconomics, but the above eight lawlike statements express the fundamentals of neo-classical economics (p. 346).⁴

⁴ Hausman says that many people would say that (1) - (3) assert that people are rational and (1) - (4) assert that people are economically rational. He admits that this equilibrium theory is rough and incomplete, and states that “(7) and (8) are the most likely to be dropped or replaced by contrary generalizations, while revealed preference theory is supposed to supplant (1) – (5) ... These characterizations of prevailing circumstances are not regarded by economists as discovered by or as asserted by their theory. They provide a sketch of the circumstances to which the theory is applied and are therefore crucial to the derivation of important theorems, but they are not themselves assertions of the theory. The term ‘*assumption*,’ of which economists are perhaps overly fond, fits these *stipulations* well” (p. 346, italic add).

The lawlike assumptions found in an economic equilibrium theory are stipulated or *prescribed* as a set. Theories about rationality and consumer choice are the means for the measurement of certain economic and social phenomena. They are the means for making microeconomic policy decisions. Economists base their empirical research and 'welfare recommendations' upon these propositions of a 'general equilibrium theory.'⁵

III. 'Adequate Evidence' Assertions Are Prescriptions

A third kind of prescription are assertions of 'justification,' 'sufficiency,' or 'adequacy' of evidence in a person's claim to have knowledge. Personal justifications terminate on a person-dependent mode in the activity of justifying a belief. When **S** appeals to the background premises for believing a particular premise as part of a longer argument, a regress of reasons is terminated by *persons* who accept a given premise to be true without further questions or doubt. There are no objective criteria for determining when a regress should end. There are no objective weighing mechanisms to describe when given evidence is 'sufficient' for **S** to be 'justified' in believing **p**. Assertions that '**S** has presented sufficient premises for believing **p**' *prescribes* that there is no further need for inquiry about the truth of **p**. In these situations, it is believed that there is a negligible possibility that there is unconsidered evidence that might lead to genuine doubt that **p**.

IV. Normative Ethical and Value Assertions Are Prescriptions

Prescriptivism maintains that ethical assertions may be approved (or disapproved) by humans, but that they are neither true nor false. Any argument with an ethical 'ought' conclusion is always derived from a set of premises that includes at least one prescriptive (ought) assertion. A moral argument includes prescribed value(s) or ethical principle(s) in its premises, in addition to purported facts, to support a moral conclusion. Prescriptivists speak of normative conduct as being 'right' or 'wrong' without the pretense that there is something 'morally objective' that is 'beyond' the values endorsed by persons.

⁵ 'Welfare' is a normative group resemblance concept. Is it best for governments to artificially stimulate an economy in order to obtain full employment? Should automation be feared as a job killer? Should a negative income tax be implemented to partially standardize transfer payments and help stabilize economic business cycles? Philosophers' failure to ascertain the nature of ethical assertions has hindered economists and policy makers from making innovative suggestions on how best to manage a free market economy.

The Limits of the Knowable

Given that there are several kinds of prescriptive assertions, a conclusion pertaining to the limits of knowledge, is that *prescriptive assertions are not true nor false, nor knowable*. In contrast, *a descriptive assertion is actually correct (i.e., true) and potentially knowable* only if its content corresponds to (or reflects) a state of affairs. The definition of knowledge and descriptive-prescriptive thesis do *not* endorse ‘empiricism’ (roughly, the theory that all knowledge is obtained by the five senses). Instead, a substantial amount of knowledge comes from understanding the intentions motivating natural and artificial languages, and not directly from sense experience.

Descriptions are Knowable

I. Empirical Assertions Are Descriptions

Statements about material affairs are the most common form of description. Sentences about empirical matters (e.g., 'I see a table,' 'Australia is located in the Southern Hemisphere,' or 'My knee hurts') are mundane and there is no question that they are descriptive in meaning and have an objective truth or falsity value in a context. Theories in the physical sciences involve some stipulations and prescriptive assertions, but the content of scientific empirical theories are mostly descriptive.

II. Mathematical True-in-a-Language Entailments Are Descriptions

True propositions of mathematics and symbolic logic are derived relative to the stipulated foundations (axioms, definitions, inference rules, grammar, and vocabulary) of a deductive system. The propositions that 'three is prime,' ' $7+5=12$,' 'the sum of the interior angles of a triangle is 180 degrees,' and 'Abraham Lincoln is Abraham Lincoln' are *true-in-a-language* necessities. Thus, when *applying* standard measurement systems, the truth of deduced statement (e.g., ' $141678 + 639465 = 781143$ ') expresses a propositional statement that has a correctness *independent* of its acceptance (or non-acceptance) by particular persons. Mathematical propositions when applied to practical matters can be objectively true: If Sam has 1 marble and Suzie has 8 marbles, then they have 9 marbles in total.

III. & IV. Reportive and Theoretic Definitions Are Descriptions

These two categories of assertion have a linguistic entity (i.e., a definiendum) as their subject. Reportive definitions (truly or falsely) describe linguistic practice. A definiendum in a reportive definition is claimed to have a standard definiens in a given language or language community. Theoretic definitions purport to describe the nature of an entity or phenomena represented by a definiendum, with the intent to make the definiendum-to-definiens relationship a true one.

V. Aesthetic Assertions Are Descriptions

It may seem a little surprising, but in chapter eight, it was argued that another kind of descriptive assertion is that of aesthetic judgment. When a person states that 'Ariana Grande is the best contemporary female vocalist' or that 'the painting is ugly' or that '*The Addams Family* was a bad movie,' that person attributes a relation between her preferences (or values) as an existing mental state to an aesthetic item. A person is *describing* what she likes and dislikes about x. In most cases, we grant that persons can know what aesthetic experiences (truly) please them. Because there is some inter-subjective commonality of aesthetic value, prescriptive recommendations often follow from an aesthetic experience, e.g., whether a movie is worth seeing, or whether a kind of ice cream tastes good, and so on.

VI. Social Science Theories Are Descriptions

The social sciences include Anthropology, Economics, Education, Geography, History, Linguistics, Political Science, Psychology and Sociology, among others. Social sciences draw upon empirical methods and attempt to be objective, and to emulate the practices of the physical sciences. In the social sciences, scholars seek to describe expectations of how persons will behave on the basis of the beliefs and desires attributed to them. Social science theories often explain beliefs and behavior by rendering them intelligible. Models and theories attempt to simulate a world that explains human intentions. Empirical theses are additionally researched.

A 'Prescription' Exceeds the Explanatory Power of a 'Performative'

A 'prescription' supplants J.L. Austin's (1975) notion of a 'performative' utterance. Austin introduced the performative as a kind of assertion that isn't true or false, but is used to do something (to ask, to warn, to bequeath, to promise, to bet, to request, etc.). Austin's examples can be subsumed in terms of descriptions and prescriptions:

1) An 'interrogative' (e.g., 'Do you know where a gas station is?') is interpreted as the conjunction of a description and prescription: 'I do not know x' (*description*) and 'please tell me x' (*prescription*).

2) With a 'warning' (e.g., 'Watch out!') a *prescription* is asserted, often accompanied by a *description* ('You'll get hit') about probable consequences of not heeding a warning.

3) In 'bequeathing' to assert 'I give and bequeath my wristwatch to my brother, after I die' is to *describe* one's wishes and *prescribe* to executors to abide by one's will.

4) The concept of a 'promise' is to sincerely *describe* one's intention to do something, and to *prescribe* to oneself to perform appropriate follow-up actions.

5) The 'solicitation of a bet' (e.g., 'I'll bet you \$25 that the Green Bay Packers will win') *describes* a bettor's willingness to bet money on his belief (prediction) about the outcome of a sporting event and *prescribes* to the listener to accept the wager.

6) A 'request' (e.g., 'Would you please close the door?') is a *prescription* that a person should aid the speaker, and implicitly *describes* that the speaker desires (or has value) in having the door closed.

7) Whether a sentence is being used to describe or prescribe (or both) is relative to a social context. For example, a cashier at a restaurant may assert to a patron that 'Your sandwich is ready' which *describes* the fact of the completion of the order and *prescribes* patron pick-up.

8) The assertion 'In order to turn off the lights you must flip the switch' is ambiguous without context. The speaker may be informing the listener about how to turn off the lights in a room (i.e., *describing*) or the speaker may be requesting the listener to turn off the lights (i.e., *prescribing*).

A Comparison with the Declarative-Interrogative-Imperative Distinction

The descriptive-prescriptive distinction about speaker meaning can be contrasted with what Sadock and Zwicky (1985) describe as the three basic *sentence types* that have similar functions (of speaker meaning) in most natural languages:

These are the declarative, interrogative, and imperative. At first approximation, these three types can be described as follows: The *declarative* is used for making announcements, stating conclusions, making claims, relating stories and so on. The *interrogative* elicits a verbal response from the addressee. It is used principally to gain information. The *imperative* indicates the speaker's desire to influence future events. It is of service in making requests, giving orders, making suggestions and the like (p. 160, italics added).

One obvious problem with this functional classification of speaker 'sentence' meaning is that 'imperatives' are often asserted as 'declaratives' (e.g., 'It is wrong to do x'). These two types of sentences don't seem mutually exclusive. The descriptive-prescriptive theory of speaker meaning allows for more insightful explanations than this well-known standard.

The Problem of the Irrelevance of Contemporary Secular Philosophy

Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggie in an essay “When Philosophy Lost Its Way” (2016), and Susan Haack in *Putting Philosophy to Work* (2013), and Myisha Cherry’s “Coming Out of the Shade” (2017) rightly claim that the discipline has become unproductive, despite many published journal essays and books. The mainstream of philosophy fails to engage with ordinary people. Their work is summarized.

“When Philosophy Lost Its Way” by Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggie in *New York Times* ‘Opinion Column’ January 11, 2016.

Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggie teach in the department of philosophy and religion at the University of North Texas. They are the authors of *Socrates Tenured: The Institutions of 21st Century Philosophy* (2016). The Prelude to their book (pp. 7-10) includes revised text from their opinion column. We will edit several paragraphs from the *New York Times* column sharing their perspective of philosophy (some italics added).

The history of Western Philosophy can be presented in a number of ways. It can be told in terms of periods—ancient, medieval, and modern. We can divide into rival traditions (empiricism versus rationalism, analytic versus Continental), or into various core areas (metaphysics, epistemology, ethics). It can also, of course, be viewed through the critical lens of gender or racial exclusion, as a discipline almost entirely fashioned for and by white men of European descent.

Yet despite the richness and variety of these accounts, all of them pass over a momentous turning point: the locating of philosophy within the modern institution (the research university) in the late 19th century. This *institutionalization* of philosophy made it into a discipline that could be seriously pursued only in an academic setting...

Take this simple detail: Before its migration to the university, philosophy never had a central home. Philosophers could be found anywhere-- serving as diplomats, living off pensions, grinding lenses, as well as within a university. Afterward, if they were “serious” thinkers, the expectation was that philosophers would inhabit the research university...

Philosophers needed to embrace the structure of the modern research university, which consists of various specialties demarcated from one another. That was the only way to secure the survival of their newly demarcated, newly “purified” discipline. “Real” or “serious” philosophers had to be identified, trained, and credentialed. Disciplinary philosophy became the reigning standard for what would count as *proper* philosophy.

This was the act of purification that gave birth to the concept of philosophy most of us know today. As a result, and to a degree rarely acknowledged, the *institutional imperative* of the university has come to drive the theoretical agenda. If philosophy was to have a secure place in the academy, it needed its own discrete domain, its own arcane language, its own standards of success and its own specialized concerns.

Frodeman and Briggie state that philosophers often feel envy and feelings of inadequacy when compared to the progress of the physical sciences. They continue:

...Much has been made of this inability of philosophy to match the cognitive success of the sciences. But what has passed by unnoticed is philosophy's all-to-successful aping of the institutional form of the sciences. We, too, produce research articles. We, too, are judged by the same coin of the realm: peer-reviewed products. We, too, develop sub-specializations far from the comprehension of the person on the street. In all of these ways we are so very "scientific."

... Though it seems foreign to us now, before purification the philosopher (and the natural philosopher) was assumed to be morally superior to other sorts of people. The 18th century thinker Joseph Priestly wrote "a philosopher ought to be something greater and better than another man." Philosophy, understood as the love of wisdom, was seen to be a vocation, like the priesthood... As the historian Steven Shapin has noted, the rise of the disciplines in the 19th century changed all of this. The implicit democracy of all of the disciplines ushered in "the moral equivalence of the scientist" to everyone else... There was a brief window when philosophy could have replaced religion as the glue of society; but the moment passed. People stopped listening as philosophers focused on debates among themselves.

They conclude that philosophy has fostered a culture of technical writing that might be called "the genius contest":

Philosophic activity devolved into a contest to prove just how clever one can be in creating or destroying arguments. Today, a hyperactive productivist churn of scholarship keeps philosophers chained to their computers. Like the sciences, philosophy has largely become a technical enterprise, the only difference being that we manipulate words rather than genes or chemicals...⁶

Frodeman and Briggles' overall *Socrates Tenured* organizational solution is to suggest that philosophers should balance their work between a university setting and 'field work'

⁶ In chapter 1 the authors recount a professor's explanation of the Ph.D. dissertation, and a philosopher's subsequent career (p. 7): "Find a small topic that no one has studied; dig into it for years. Don't stop until you know it better than anyone—except for the other 30 or 40 specialists in the area. When you graduate you will spend the next 30 years writing for that group of specialists. That's how it works."

that involves sometimes moving into think tanks, policy units, community groups, as well as working with other departments in medicine, law, and the sciences.⁷

Putting Philosophy to Work (2013) by Susan Haack

Susan Haack is a distinguished professor of philosophy. She voices her complaints about the professionalization of philosophy. She writes (pp. 236-237):

... with philosophy increasingly professionalized, increasingly self-conscious about its status as a discipline, and increasingly splintered into sub-specialisms, it seems that many philosophers seek to define themselves professionally by their allegiance to a specialized sub-field or to a specialized method of philosophizing... Worst yet, in the culture of boosterism and self-promotion that now pervades the universities, many are tempted to tout whatever philosophical questions most interest them as *the* most important or critical issues, and whatever way of going about philosophy best suits their temperament or talents as the most fruitful, the most rigorous, the most up to date, the most scientific...

She later states:

... chairpersons competing for scarce resources want to impress deans with how “research-active” their faculty are; faculty jockeying for promotions want to impress chairs with their “productivity.” No wonder, then, that many professors soon adopt to the reliance on deans, etc., on rankings, number of publications, amount of grant money, and so forth: by giving more priority to their research than to their teaching, and more priority to graduate than undergraduate students, by presenting and publishing more, and by putting time and energy into applying for grants and “promoting their department.” (p. 262).

⁷ In criticism of Frodeman and Briggie, it is evident that their view of what philosophy was, and what it should be, differ from the conceptual analysis methodology advocated here. These authors depict Socrates as assimilating the role of a questioner, non-expert, and the gadfly, and think that Socrates would *disapprove* of philosophers becoming experts (p. 7). They also conceive of philosophy as being concerned with ‘living a good life’ (p. 8) and that with its questioning nature, philosophy was once viewed ‘more as a process than product.’ They state that “Knowing and being good were intimately linked, for the study of ethics elevated those who pursued it. The point of philosophy, after all, was to become good rather than only to collect or produce knowledge” (p. 10). (It is questionable whether Socrates would disapprove of philosophers arguing for a final ‘product’ processed by experts. Also, their perceived close connection between philosophy and normative ethics inspired by Aristotle, can be questioned).

... Conferences seem to become more and more occasions for making contacts, for networking, and for talking yourself, or your department up; and less and less occasions for the serious exchange of ideas. At one recent meeting, for example, I was struck by the frequency of mutually reassuring references from one speaker to others, and of shorthand phrases alluding to the very narrow seam of literature familiar to almost everyone present (p. 263).

Haack sees the burgeoning “research ethic” as disastrous, with the ever-increasing pressure to present and publish papers and a spread of the culture of grants-and-research-projects from the sciences to the humanities. She says that the universities’ enthusiastic embrace of the concept of “productivity” (writing specialty essays) is more appropriate to manufacturing widgets than to advancing knowledge (pp. 251-252).

“Coming Out of the Shade” by Myisha Cherry in *Philosophy’s Future: The Problem of Philosophical Progress*, edited by Russell Blackford and Damien Broderick (2017).

On page 22, Myisha Cherry, an associate professor at the University of California at Riverside, states the origins of the title of her essay:

Dave Hume claims, “abstruse philosophy... vanishes when the philosopher *leaves the shade*, and comes into the open day (1975, 7). I read Hume’s reference to “leaving the shade” as saying the complicated, other-worldly, and out-of-touch nature of philosophy disappears when, for example, philosophers get off of their isolated armchairs and become accessible, speak clearly, and engage with the public and with other thinkers. Coming out of the shade is the act of philosophers leaving their philosophical bubbles...

In the opening paragraphs, Cherry admits to anxiety that she cannot adequately express to laypersons ‘what she does’ as a ‘professional philosopher.’ That she writes and teaches, cannot make clear what philosophy’s contribution to society is. Laypersons have difficulty in understanding how a philosopher does anything meaningful or relevant. She says that “At times what philosophers do in philosophy can be viewed as out of touch with the world or at least with real people and real issues in the world” (p. 21). She offers several suggestions for how philosophers can come out of the shade (paraphrased):

(1) It is a requirement that philosophers no longer write in an inaccessible language that only a few specialists can understand. It requires that philosophers no longer write so abstractly even if it brings with it the reward that the field will label it as “brilliant”—not because they understand it, but because it is impenetrable. As David Hume notes, they are wrapped up in principles and notions that they cannot possibly understand. Even if the philosopher’s words are clear, it is also important that this research is not kept locked away in the hidden archives of philosophical journals to be discovered and viewed only by the few.

(2) Philosophy prides itself on rigor. Some philosophical texts are excluded from the cannon and some articles are rejected from journals, not because they are not saying intellectually valuable, but based on the view that they lack rigor... While I think rigor is important, it does not equate to abstruse, inaccessible prose... The obsession of some philosophers with rigor suggests intellectual posturing and elitism. On this view, the more rigorous a philosopher is, the smarter they look.

(3) Philosophy also prides itself on clarity. Philosophers, however, have a hard time understanding each other’s work. If philosophers are to come out of the shade, they must also endeavor to make their work comprehensible not just to the public but also to those other philosophers who are not in their particular sub-field. Let us be honest, there are several sessions we attend in philosophy conferences in which we have no idea what is being talked about. This has nothing to do with technical language specific to the topic. It has everything to do with clarity. If philosophers cannot understand each other’s work, what makes them think others outside of philosophy can understand it? (pp. 22-23).

(4) Just creating a work that can be read and understood means nothing if that work never has the chance to be read. The profession of philosophy must figure out a way to make philosophical research more available to colleagues, academics in other disciplines, and the public... I think social psychology and science journals offer the best practice for making research easily available... Academics have the freedom to post their journal articles and book chapters on their private websites, as well as shared research academic websites (pp. 24-25).

(5) A wider audience would love to learn what philosophers have to say, if only they could hear and understand it. Philosophical engagement is enriched when it engages with the public and other thinkers outside of philosophy (p. 26).

Cherry proposes an organizational solution to philosophy's woes, one that promotes engagement with other disciplines and public forums, including television and podcasts.

The Sociology of Professional Philosophy

Let's recapitulate how philosophy is now practiced. The philosopher is typically a faculty member in a university setting, and usually conforms to the following norms:

(1) Career model: The professional philosopher is expected to present oneself as having designated interests, competencies, and expertise in respected area(s) of the discipline. Innate intelligence and raw talent (e.g., exceptional logical ability, capacity for critical thinking and problem-solving) are thought to be necessary requirements for success in the field. These mental capacities are analogous to raw and innate abilities of exceptional athletes in professional sports.

(2) Publish or perish: A philosopher's responsibility is to publish in the most prestigious journals, and in doing so refer to recent literature in the field. Many philosophers admit that they publish, not because they have something interesting to say, but instead there are professional requirements to publish. Philosophers need to write for tenure, job security, and promotion.

(3) Think small: Research contributes to a small well-defined debate in which substantive progress can be made. Production of short, highly specialized journal articles is expected. Narrowly focused articles are understood as 'minor moves' in a debate. The more *rigorous* (i.e., detailed, complex) an essay is, the better its chance for publication.

(4) Be contentious: Philosophers should approach each other's work with severe skepticism, criticism, and an eye for debate. Colin McGinn (2002) observes that live philosophical debates at universities are often "a clashing of analytically honed intellects with pulsing egos attached to them. In fact, truth to tell, philosophy and ego are never very far apart. Philosophical discussion can be a kind of intellectual blood sport, in which egos get bruised and buckled, even impaled... No one likes to be publicly refuted,

and in philosophy it happens all the time" (p. 63). Timothy Williamson (2018) characterizes this style of philosophical debate as 'gladiatorial combat' (p. 20). Overgaard et. al. (2013) state: "Mathematicians and scientists, it is claimed, appear to make progress because they are trying to agree. Philosophers, on the other hand, try not to agree. This is not a question of individual psychology but a matter of professional temperament: philosophers as an academic profession, one might say, suffer from an excess of criticality" (pp. 51-52).

(5) Write in a professional manner: An article should be a fragment within a specialty interest. Articles are to be abstract, dispassionate, and rigorous, similar to the sciences and mathematics. Philosophers should *respond* to other philosophers' views. 'Competing' theories and models are discussed. Essays encourage further debate (and publications) among (a small group of) experts' *active interests* within a field. Interests often include new (stipulated) distinctions and topics. Publish and flourish.⁸

How to Fix Philosophy?

The mainstream of philosophy fails to engage with ordinary people who have natural interest in philosophical questions (about knowledge, ethics, mathematics, aesthetics). Ordinary people aren't interested in philosophers' technical debates. Although the university setting that stresses 'productivity' (i.e., published works) for department prestige (and financial benefit) is partially to blame, much of the problem is the result of the follow-the-leader idolization that many philosophers have towards the subject. Philosophers tend to *respond* to the (historical) thoughts of others. As a first step, analytic philosophy needs to critically reassess its 'idols,' and its 'sacred' beliefs. The following paragraphs suggest how to improve philosophy.

⁸ Scott Soames (2003b, p. 463) lauds sub-field specialization: "Gone are the days of large, central figures whose work is accessible and relevant to, as well as read by, nearly all analytic philosophers. Philosophy has become a highly organized discipline, done by specialists primarily for other specialists. The number of philosophers has exploded, the volume of publication has swelled, and the subfields of serious philosophical investigation have multiplied. Not only is the broad field of philosophy today far too vast to be embraced by one mind, something similar is true even of the many highly specialized subfields."

A. It is suggested that analytic philosophy needs to reconsider the influence of mathematician Gottlob Frege upon the philosophy of language, especially with respect to formal semantics. Many principles of contemporary formal semantics are *false*:

(#1) The concept of 'linguistic meaning' should be among the primary concepts of interest in a philosophy of natural language.

(#2) The Principle of Linguistic Reference: Linguistic entities found in complete sentences (a) can literally possess meaning, (b) can be about, or refer to things in context, (c) can denote (or refer to) their extensions.

(#3) The Principle of Compositionality: Words are the basic components of sentences, and the meaning of sentences depends (systematically) upon the meanings of the words that they are composed of. To understand the meaning of a sentence is to understand its compositional structure and to know under what conditions the sentence would be true.

(#4) Truth Conditions: A statement gets its meaning by being correlated with a state of affairs: that state-of-affairs is the statement's truth condition. Correlation between statement and truth condition is secured by 1) the referential relations that individual terms bear to objects in the world, and 2) by the way that they are combined into sentence. To know 'the meaning' of a statement is to grasp its truth condition.

(#5) A meaningful declarative sentence S represents the world as being a certain way and is either true or false.

With a Fregean-inspired worldview, analytic philosophy maintains a metaphysical, mathematical, and formal format which drives much published work. Without this false worldview, epistemology wouldn't have theories of contextualism, and the works that it has inspired. There would be no expressivism in metaethics either! The core belief about *linguistic reference* and that words have meaning, in conjunction with the other three principles (compositionality, etc.), has overshadowed the methodology of conceptual analysis and attention to *speaker reference*. Formal semantics with its logical and metaphysical underpinnings, rather than providing an informative account of language, hinders our understanding of natural language, its definitions, and its intentional aspects.

B. Currently for many philosophers there is a strong interest in theories that involve metaphysics, semantic formalism, and analyses of modality. Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* (1980) presents a 'modal metaphysics' that combines the concept of 'necessity' and a causal theory about how proper names (as linguistic entities) are known, and a theory of how names refer to objects. Williamson (2007) favors investigations of 'metaphysical modality.' It is *unlikely* that the fashionable 'possible worlds' modal semantics and model theories have much value with respect to philosophical fruitfulness.

C. An associated problem with a 'specialist' metaphysical and formal semantics worldview is that it encourages students with *innate intelligence* and raw talent (e.g., exceptional logical ability, capacity for critical thinking and problem-solving) to study philosophy without necessarily having any really inspired 'new' ideas. Philosophers are trained to react to the views of others. The contentiousness aspect of philosophy's culture creates a field of philosophers with 'competing' theories, models, and arguments, many times variations of one another, or of existing predecessors. Being *critical of existing* theories (among a philosophical genre) is a 'follow-the-leader' format. It stifles attention to competing worldviews, or critical counters to existing consensus views (e.g., the consensus that a definition of 'knowledge' is impossible). As stated, with the demand to publish short, specialized essays for job security, and promotion, there is little time and incentive for philosophers to think about broader areas within philosophy or be critical of existing paradigm beliefs within their own genre. *Philosophers need to recognize this.*

D. The "peer-review crisis" about the role and function of journal publications in the advancement of philosophical careers needs to be resolved. Samantha Copeland and Lavinia Marin (2024) document the contemporary problems with the 'publish or perish' model in a university setting that stresses 'productivity' (i.e., published works) for personal and department prestige and financial benefit. Since publication works as a currency for academic jobs, professionals in academic philosophy want to make their CV's stand out with a large number of publications appearing in prestigious journals.

With this, there are too many papers to review. A major source of the problem is that peer review is unrewarded and voluntary. It is a service that academics perform for one another. This creates a circular system where philosophers labor to produce papers

and also review them. As a result, it is difficult to find reviewers for philosophy papers with the staggering volume of submitted essays. Reviewers are overburdened.

Copeland and Marin argue that ideally, peer review should provide a site for developing ‘skills’ in writing and argumentation. Philosophical skills “include clarity and precision in writing... recognizing a good argument, a relevant point, the precise use of concepts or examples, as well as a willingness and ability to critically engage with both one’s own ideas and those of others” (p. 138). Philosophical skills are dialogical skills; one cannot develop these without engaging with other philosophers. Philosophical writing is learned by practicing a lot and by receiving expert feedback. For many philosophers, the process of peer review is a necessary and welcome step to produce a good paper. It is expected that an essay might go through several rounds and several journals. The need for systematic dialogical engagement is inherent in the practice of being a philosopher. The Socratic method is a back-and-forth standard for engaging in philosophy. Persons become proficient philosophers by refining their skills.

Copeland and Marin note that Jennifer Whiting (2015) has suggested that authors should only select their best publications for job applications, making the number of aggregated publications less significant. As a result, universities should decrease their emphasis on the number of publications produced by a philosophy department. A second idea might be to add financial and academic compensation for reviewers.

E. A cultural problem is that some philosophers offer written works that are vacuous, boring, extravagant, self-indulgent, and present a personal worldview or narrow interest. Some journal articles and journals themselves feature this sort of elitist content, of interest to only similar intellectual elitists. The titles of journal articles confirm this. The proliferation of narrow-interest articles isn’t needed, unless independently funded.

F. Philosophy can improve itself by excluding itself from the Humanities. The Humanities are the disciplines that study aspects of human society and culture, including (1) foreign languages, (2) history (or social science), (3) language arts (literature, writing, oratory, rhetoric, poetry) and (4) the arts (painting, sculpture, photography, filmmaking, theater, music, dance). Philosophy (maybe history) should *not* be in this discipline list.

G. Returning to the main issue, the critical problem with contemporary analytic philosophy is its *failure to engage* with *ordinary people* having interest in basic philosophical questions. It is contended here that Philosophy should aspire to be relevant like the social science of Economics. Within the discipline of Economics, semi-descriptive assumptions (viz. stipulations, postulates) play a prominent role in theory construction. In the social sciences, scholars seek to describe expectations of how persons will behave on the basis of the beliefs and desires attributed to them. Social science theories explain beliefs and behavior by rendering them intelligible. Models and theories attempt to simulate a world that explains human intentions. Philosophy should not aspire to mimic the narrow-specialized work of physical scientists.

H. It is suggested that analytic conceptual analysis about core topics can indeed be of interest and importance to non-specialists. In previous chapters, I suggest a focus on these philosophical questions:

- (1) What is knowledge? Can 'knowledge' be defined?
- (2) What is 'relevance'? Can this term be defined? Does this term have more than one sense?
- (3) What is 'justification'? Can this term be defined? Does this term have more than one sense?
- (4) If I know **p**, do I know that all counter-possibilities are false? If I know **p**, do I *know* that I know **p**? Can I know that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat? Can I know that there exists an external world?
- (5) Is it possible to generally define what is 'positive,' 'undermining,' and 'defeating' evidence, with a precise definiens?
- (6) With a single lottery ticket, can I *know* that I won't win the lottery?
- (7) What is it to have 'sufficiently strong evidence' to believe (or know) **p**?
- (8) How is an epistemic regress stopped, where an inquisitor continually questions (in a regress) the evidence one offers to support a given belief?
- (9) Is it known that the method of induction is a reliable mode of reasoning? Are there relevant reasons for knowing that induction will remain a reliable mode of reasoning? (This is Hume's Problem of Induction).

(10) With respect to human values, are these values 'objective' or 'subjective'? Are there 'objective intrinsic goods?' Are there 'moral properties?' Can 'goodness' be identified in terms of non-moral properties or intrinsic objective properties? Are there 'moral truths?' Is there an objective and true morality?

(11) What is the difference between an assertion that is expressed as a 'description' and an assertion expressed as a 'prescription'? Can these terms be theoretically defined?

(12) Is the theory of 'cultural relativism' correct? Should we always act in conformity with our society's norms? Should we just act according to our own value system? Should we be tolerant of existing (or new) practices?

(13) Are there sound deductive arguments (involving exclusively true premises) that can prove that a given conduct is right or wrong?

(14) What is a 'definition'? Are there different kinds of definitions?

(15) What is a 'concept'? Are there different kinds of concepts?

(16) What are the relations between a 'definition' and a 'concept'?

(17) What is the structure of mathematics? What is the *epistemic status* of 'axioms,' 'definitions,' and 'inference rules' in mathematics? Can we *know* that certain axioms, definitions, and inference rules are *true*? Do mathematical entities (e.g., squares, numbers, and ratios) *exist*? And if so, in what sense (and how) do they exist? What is the source of mathematical truth? Is it based on a set of 'precise formal stipulations' or is it based upon an '*a priori* real and objective order of abstract mind-independent entities?' How can mathematical propositions (e.g., $2+2 = 4$) be 'objectively true'?

(18) When S says, 'this painting is beautiful,' what is this sentence about? Is the speaker reporting that the *painting* is beautiful? Or does the speaker report her *subjective experience* when viewing the painting?

(19) Can aesthetic judgments be true or false? Or are aesthetic judgments entirely subjective, and not true nor false? Are some persons' aesthetic tastes better than others? If aesthetic judgments are subjective, how can we assert something beyond our own personal points of view? What is 'art'?

(20) What is the proper methodology for analytic philosophy? The search for metaphysical *a priori* truths? The formulation of deductive arguments? Should philosophy be mathematized? What is deductive, inductive and abductive reasoning? Should philosophy rely on 'intuitions' and 'conceptual analysis?'

(21) What is an 'intuition?' What is the difference between 'worldview intuitions' and 'linguistic intuitions?'

(22) What is 'conceptual analysis?'

(23) Do linguistic entities literally 'refer' to entities (i.e., to things, extensions)? To understand the meaning of a sentence does one need to understand the compositional structure of the sentence, and know under what conditions the sentence would be true? Is the principle of compositionality empirically true?

(24) What is the nature of 'speaker reference'? Does a speaker's referent depend on a speaker's intentions?

(25) What is a 'proposition'? Do we have 'attitudes' towards propositions? Can propositions be either 'descriptive' or 'prescriptive' in intent with a speaker's meaning?

(26) Can 'philosophical metaphysics' really investigate the nature of reality? Can metaphysicians identify the nature, constitution, and structure of *all that there is*? Are there *a priori* conceptual truths? Does a discourse that develops a conceptual framework involving the notions of 'object,' 'existence,' 'identity,' 'property,' 'universals,' 'particulars,' 'relations,' 'necessity,' 'similarity,' 'dissimilarity,' 'possible worlds,' 'temporality,' 'persistence,' and 'causation,' really viable? Are 'possible worlds' models formulated in metaphysics and semantics informative?

(27) What does the concept of 'necessity' involve? Metaphysicians claim that it is a feature of 'propositions,' and that propositions can be said to be possible, necessary, impossible, or contingent. Metaphysicians seek to understand the nature of 'metaphysical necessity.' But doesn't the term 'necessity' have different senses? For example, what are differences between 'causal necessity,' 'deductive necessity,' and 'conceptual necessity?' Is there really such a thing as 'metaphysical necessity? Is metaphysics *really* the 'science of the possible?'

(28) What exists? Three recognized answers:

(1) The question 'what exists' is asked relative to specialized disciplines: The astronomer asks whether there exist 'black holes?' The biologist asks what kinds of 'anti-bodies' exist? Archaeologists ask whether the lost city of El Dorado exists? The ordinary sense of 'existence' is context-relative according to an inquirer's interests. What 'exists' is postulated by the different physical sciences (e.g., electrons, galaxies), mathematics (e.g., numbers, points), social sciences (e.g., equilibrium, inflation), fiction (e.g., Superman), and pragmatic stipulations (e.g., tall students). There is *no true metaphysics* about what '*really*' exists.

(2) With regard to what is the '*fundamental existent*', it might be that *physical (or material) entities* are the primary existent from which all other entities are composed of.

Physicalism is the doctrine that *only material entities exist*, and that any other entities are constituted or emanate from physical entities. One definition of 'existence' is that 'x exists if and only if x belongs to the space-time-causal system that is our world' (Aune, 1985, p. 35). When applied to the physiology of humans, 'physicalism' can be *adopted* as the view that mental states (e.g., different kinds of concepts, beliefs, desires, values, and intentions) are *located* as physical states.

(3) With regard to what is the '*fundamental existent*', it is *God* that is the primary (supernatural) existent from which all other entities are created. This is '*theism*,' and of course, it is a view that is very widely held.

This final question about 'existence' with respect to 'physicalism' and 'theism' is important. Theists maintain that the prophets that they follow are infallible purveyors of moral law. The moral views of theists are typically strong and rigidly held. For example, the abortion debate is strongly fueled by the side maintaining the objective existence of moral truth, and that as followers of God (or other deity) that their beliefs are true. Stephen Prothero (2010) surveys eight rival religions that are the glue to certain societies and cultures. Organized religions clearly have many more followers than does secular analytic philosophy. Should analytic philosophy strive to have more impact on society?

Conclusion

In this book, a physicalist ontology and a social scientific methodology has been advocated. In the overview, the basic questions of philosophy have been answered with (1) a theoretical definition of ‘knowledge,’ (2) a conceptual analysis of the nature of human language (both natural and artificial) including a theory of ‘definition,’ (3) an examination of the nature of ‘concepts’ as physically instantiated kinds within our brains, and (4) the nature of the descriptive-prescriptive distinction and its relevant applications.

Frodeman and Briggie state in their essay that “... There was a brief window when philosophy could have replaced religion as the glue of society; but the moment passed.” Perhaps, they are right. But if we want to make philosophy more relevant to ordinary people, we should make Philosophy a social science. The methodology of analytic philosophy functioning as a social science, employs ‘intuitions,’ ‘conceptual analyses,’ and ‘the method of cases.’ Philosophers should:

- 1) Focus less on publishing, more on teaching.
- 2) Focus less on mathematical and formal methodologies.
- 3) Be less contentious. Be impartial. Be ready to assess ideas on their merit.
- 4) Avoid formalized technical definitions. They are always stipulative.
- 5) Focus on core issues: Knowledge, Metaethics, Mathematics, Aesthetics.

Philosophers, if they wish to become relevant (and employable) should be able to discuss the 28 questions outlined above and teach these debates to students (e.g., in universities, community colleges). A less specialized practice of analytic philosophy is needed within the university setting. Like Economics courses, which are regarded as practical and beneficial, philosophers should likewise seek to have the same relevant informative impact. Philosophers should give up the search for philosophical ‘progress’ (emulating physical science) and instead strive to get the *right answers* to the most basic questions, as economists have successfully done with their social scientific theories. Insofar as academics are consulted for help with answers to contemporary societal challenges, it is *scientists* and *economists* who tend to be called upon. It is hoped that in the future, philosophers, too, can be consulted for help with contemporary societal challenges.