

## **Descriptions, Prescriptions, & the Limits of Knowledge**

### **Introduction: Volume 2**

This second volume of *Descriptions, Prescriptions, and The Limits of Knowledge* follows with details about contemporary issues in the philosophy of language, mathematics, metaphysics and the history of philosophy, in arguing that a ‘description’ can be knowable, while a ‘prescription’ is not knowable. These terms were introduced in the first volume and defined as follows:

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.

Throughout this volume, we will continue to use ‘conceptual analysis’ to investigate important philosophical concepts.

### **Chapter One: What is Meaning and Reference?**

Contemporary formal semantics is understood as the study of the 'meaning' of words and sentences. The primary concepts of semantics are that of meaning, reference, and truth. It is assumed the proper business of a theory of meaning is to specify how language connects with the world and to explain an inherent 'aboutness' of language. Formal theorists want to understand how words (representing different things and having different functions) can be combined to form well-formed (meaningful) sentences. If the words of a sentence are systematically connected in the right sort of way, then it is plausible that a sentence can have meaning and be either true or false.

In response to this formalized tradition, I ask whether the concepts of 'meaning' and 'reference' should be of primary interest when doing semantics. I scrutinize the principles of linguistic reference and compositionality, and question whether a sentence's meaningfulness is exclusively about its being true or false. A theory of 'speaker reference' is advanced as a contrast to formal theories of 'linguistic reference.' This chapter is of great importance in *challenging* the dominant formal methods approach.

## **Chapter Two: What is a Proposition?**

The term 'proposition' has a broad and diverse use in philosophy. Instead of thinking of a 'proposition' as an 'abstract entity,' I believe that this concept can be subject to a conceptual analysis and stipulated with a fixed definiens that is consistent with *most* (not all) core intuitions typically held by philosophers about what a 'proposition' is. The simplified definition that I propose captures much of the important aspects of its intuitive content: (1) A *proposition* is expressed as a complete declarative sentence *asserted in a context* that presents the '*content*' of S's thought. Propositions exist as the 'shared content' of sentences. (2) A proposition is (metaphorically) 'what is said' by a declarative sentence. (3) Different *sentences* may be used to express the *same* proposition (relative to context). (4) *Asserted sentences* (and their corresponding *descriptive propositions*) are *true* or *false* relative to context. (5) But against these common intuitions, I argue that *propositions* need *not* be defined as *exclusively truth-apt* (i.e., there exist *prescriptive propositions*). (6) I deny the contemporary metaphysical formula postulating that a 'proposition' is the 'object' of a 'propositional attitude.' Thus, the first four intuitions are common to most philosophers. The final two are controversial and need explanation.

## **Chapter Three: Is There Metaphysical Reality and Necessity?**

Metaphysics is understood to be the most general of all philosophical and scientific disciplines. It seeks to identify the nature and structure of *all that there is*. Metaphysics is thought to be the conceptually necessary backdrop for every other discipline. Because metaphysics is not an empirical science, and since philosophers don't appeal to experimental or observational data in support of its claims, metaphysics is traditionally conceived as an *a priori* science. Metaphysical realists maintain that there are objective, truth-evaluable answers to basic questions of ontology (i.e., existence).

As a metaphysical anti-realist, I join other authors in denying that there is a 'metaphysical reality' in any sense. With a skeptical perspective to the notion of metaphysical necessity, I criticize the Kripkean (1980) explanations of the epistemology of 'natural kinds' and 'proper names' in terms of possible worlds.

#### **Chapter Four: A Conceptualist Account of Mathematics**

The debate between mathematical realists (platonists) and mathematical anti-realists (nominalists) is examined. A realist believes that: (1) there exist mathematical objects, (2) mathematical objects are 'abstract,' and (3) mathematical objects are independent of our thought, language, and practices. These 'abstract objects' are posited as non-spatiotemporal, nonphysical, unchanging and causally inert. A nominalist, in contrast, maintains that there cannot be objective non-spatiotemporal mathematical 'abstract objects' existing independent of the human mind. The nominalist maintains the 'objects' of mathematics must be explained in some other way, because persons could never have knowledge about objects that don't have a physical location. 'Conceptualism' is advocated here as an alternative anti-realist doctrine. It is argued that 'mathematical entities' are best conceived as concepts in mental systems functionalized in the forms of definitions, vocabulary, syntactic rules, inference rules, and axioms. This allows the inference of formal deductive consequences as entailed by proofs.

#### **Chapter Five: On Why Mathematics is Neither Analytic nor *A Priori***

The ideas that mathematical propositions are semantically 'analytic' or knowable '*a priori*' are scrutinized. 'Analyticity' is described historically and is redefined so as to explain why 'all bachelors are unmarried,' and 'a triangle is three-sided' are true, but otherwise the concept is shown to have very little theoretical value. The concepts of '*a priori* knowledge' and 'possible world semantics' are analyzed. Examples of *a priori* knowledge are identified (e.g., axioms of deductive systems, inference rules, tautologies) and are alternatively explained without needing the *a priori/a posteriori* distinction. The concepts of '*a priori* knowledge' and 'analyticity' while both theoretically retainable and historically influential, offer little insight into the nature of the discipline of mathematics.

#### **Chapter Six: A Brief History of Analytic Philosophy**

A short history of major events in mathematics, logic, and analytic philosophy since 1879 is described. The debate about whether 'formal language' or 'conceptual analysis' is the best way to proceed in addressing philosophical problems is addressed.

### **Chapter Seven: Epistemology Since 1983**

With the pursuit of a conditional definition of ‘knowledge’ abandoned, two alternative approaches to epistemic problems (e.g., skepticism, Gettier cases, lottery situations) distinguished themselves: *epistemic contextualism* and *virtue epistemology*. These two approaches will be examined. Contextualism is a *semantic* theory that is thought to have implications for epistemic questions. Virtue epistemology focuses on the epistemic *evaluation of persons* and their intellectual abilities and character traits. It contends that persons are the primary objects of evaluation, and “intellectual virtue” is more important than ‘justification’ and ‘knowledge,’ which are types of belief evaluation.

### **Chapter Eight: A Critique of Prichard’s Anti-Luck Virtue Epistemology**

Duncan Prichard presents an evolving thread of a metaphysical epistemology that is based upon the broad intuition that “knowledge excludes luck.”

### **Chapter Nine: Williamson’s Model-Building Conception of Philosophy**

In *Philosophical Method: A Very Short Introduction* (2020), Williamson presents an elementary introduction into his vision of proper methodology for philosophy.

### **Chapter Ten: Contemporary Problems with Analytic Philosophy**

Philosophy suffers with excessive artificial distinctions and stipulative definitions.

### **Summary**

The two volumes are an extended analysis of how *sentences* are *used* by speakers as either *descriptive* or *prescriptive*, as intended in a context. On the view here, analytic philosophy should be practiced as a social science. Issues should be discussed in terms of theories that explain human intentions, beliefs, and values. Against the recent proliferation of ‘possible world’ metaphysical and formal semantic theories, it is prescribed here that analytic philosophy should be written with the intent to be relevant and accessible to non-philosophers. Analytic philosophy should address ordinary questions about knowledge, metaethics, mathematics, aesthetics, and language.