

Making Philosophy Relevant: 28 Questions (DPLK: Chapter 19, pp. 9-14)

Many persons believe that philosophy is irrelevant to ordinary persons. On the contrary, it is suggested here that analytic conceptual analysis about core topics can indeed be of interest to non-specialists:

- (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 counts as 'positive,' 'undermining,' and 'defeating' evidence, by stipulating a technically formalized definiens?¹

¹ 'Evidence' for **p** is based upon:

- 1) (a) S's background beliefs and S's interpretation of **p**: The extent to which **e** is evidence for/against **p** depends on S's background beliefs and knowledge. E.g. to be able to see spots on a person's face as evidence of measles depends on background knowledge (e.g. a physician, or mother, or someone completely unfamiliar with skin rashes). (b) Two individuals who hold different background beliefs/theories might disagree about how strong **e1** confirms a given theory, or about whether **e1** is evidence for confirming the theory at all. (c) A person's world-view intuitions (including linguistic) can limit agreement to what **e** supports **p**.
- 2) Strength of evidence helps determine S's degree of belief. The quality and quantity of evidence warrant S's personal justification for a belief **p**. S's personal (and normative) standards of caution/risk in a context, determine what evidence is sufficient.
- 3) S's psychological status has some influence upon S's evaluation of evidence. For example, S's self-confidence for assessing a given **p**, depends upon S's background beliefs and psychological temperament. S's natural intelligence, capacities, dispositions, and concern for self-consistency also contribute to what propositions are accepted as evidence for **p**.

Stipulated axioms:

If **e** is evidence *for* **p**, then **e** makes it more likely that **p** is true.

If **e** is evidence *against* **p**, then **e** makes it less likely that **p** is true.

- (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?