A note in defence of Boghossian's epistemic analyticity

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Abstract
Boghossian (1996) develops and defends an epistemic notion of analyticity. In doing so he highlights the inherent difficulty of rejecting both meaning realism and analyticity. In this note I defend his argument against two attacks (Margolis & Laurence 2001; Harman 1996) that misconstrue his arguments in a way that does little except to facilitate unjustified dismissal.

Keywords: analyticity; Quine; Boghossian.

1.   Introduction

This note defends Boghossian's construal of an epistemic conception of analyticity – in "Analyticity Reconsidered" (Boghossian 1996) – against two attacks that fail to genuinely engage with his argument. In part 2 I explain Boghossian's attempt to, contra Quine, revive an amended version of analyticity. In part 3 I look at some of the criticism that Boghossian's paper has received and argue that the criticism does not do serious damage to his project. I conclude with some remarks regarding the importance of Boghossian's argument as a whole.

2.   Analyticity as an epistemic notion

2.1   Background – Quine and meaning realism

Boghossian (1996) attempts, in "Analyticity Reconsidered", to formulate a version of analyticity that survives the arguments in "Two Dogmas" (Quine 1951). He does so by rejecting a metaphysical notion of analyticity in favour of an epistemic construal of analyticity.

The main aspect of Quinean doctrine relevant to Boghossian's view is Quine's scepticism about the notion of 'meaning'. Quine's scepticism is ultimately ontologically motivated; given his physicalist and behaviourist commitments, it is unclear exactly what meanings are supposed to be (Quine 1951: 22). In accord with the Quinean slogan "no entity without identity", he can find no reason to admit them to the realm of existent entities. Meanings are further harmful in

that they give the impression of explaining or elucidating some concepts, when in fact they cannot do so[1].

The publication of "Two Dogmas" lead to a series of rejoinders and defenses of the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements[2], but no criticism of Quine succeeded in creating a consensus that his attack had been successfully defeated. The emerging consensus increasingly became that Quine had shown the distinction to be irreparably flawed. As Harman (1996) notes, whereas a previous generation had feared the question "is your claim supposed to be analytic or synthetic?", a new generation could be intimidated by asking "aren't you assuming the analytic/synthetic distinction?".

The contemporary philosophical climate, though, is considerably different from the one in which Quine wrote his polemic. This is no place to try and give a synopsis of what philosophers currently believe, but one key point is relevant to this paper. Quine's meaning irrealism never quite met with the same general assent as his attack on the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. Furthermore, such a lack of assent to meaning irrealism has only increased over time, in 1998 already *realism* about meaning was the dominant view among philosophers (Bealer 1998: 3). Bealer describes this post-Quinean trend towards meaning realism as due to the fact that some sort of meaning realism is needed to analyse propositional attitudes, as well as the behaviourism of Quine's day being replaced by cognitivism in psychology and philosophy of mind (Bealer 1998: 3).

2.2   Boghossian's proposal

The above raises the question as to how Quine's attack on analyticity should be viewed by those who are realists about meaning. Boghossian (1996) defends the claim that such realism about meaning is inconsistent with a rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction. Instead, he wishes to show that there is an epistemic conception of analyticity that should be accepted by any reasonable philosopher who also accepts meaning realism (Boghossian 1996: 361).

Boghossian does not give an explicit definition of meaning, partly because he wants to make his case independent of any such specific conception (Boghossian 1996: 371). What is clear is that he considers meaning-facts to be facts of such a nature that they would make the meaning of "what each expression means", individually determinate (Boghossian 1996: 271). Boghossian argues that an acceptance of the existence of such facts, regardless of whether they are construed as "a history of use, a disposition, or whatever your favourite candidate may be" (Boghossian 1996: 371), cannot reasonably be made consistent with a denial of his epistemic conception of analyticity, which will be explained below. I will give a brief outline of the structure of his argument, and will only give a more complete exposition where it is needed in order to defend Boghossian against his critics.

Boghossian defines "epistemic analyiticy" in terms of a linguistic picture of belief in which the objects of beliefs are interpreted sentences, so that "for a person T to believe that p is for T to hold true a sentence S which means that p in T's idiolect" (Boghossian 1996: 362). Knowledge can now be defined in term of this view, so that "we may say that for T to know that p is for T

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[1] For a discussion of this point, see Alston (1998: 50-52).
[2] The most enduring of these counter-attacks is Grice and Strawson (1956). A collection of these counter-attacks can be found in Harris and Severen's (1970) anthology *Analyticity*.

to justifiably hold *S* true, with a strength sufficient for knowledge, and for *S* to be true" (Boghossian 1996: 362). A person, *T*, can then be said to know *p a priori* if "*T*'s warrant for holding *S* true is independent of outer, sensory experience" (Boghossian 1996: 362). This lead to the definition of the epistemic conception of analyticity which Boghossian wishes to defend. A sentence is analytic in the epistemic sense if "mere grasp of *S*'s meaning by *T* sufficed for *T*'s being justified in holding *S* true" (Boghossian 1996: 362).

He distinguishes the *epistemic* conception of analyticity, which he will defend, from the *metaphysical* conception of analyticity, which he credits Quine with having shown to be incoherent. The metaphysical notion of analyticity is one of truth in virtue of meaning where this means that a statement is analytic "if it owes its truth value completely to its meaning, and not to the facts" (Boghossian 1996: 363). On this view the meaning of an analytic statement is the sole truthmaker of the statement. Boghossian rejects the metaphysical conception of analyticity based on what he calls the "truism" that "*S* is true iff for some *p*, *S* means that *p* and *p*" (Boghossian 1996: 364). Boghossian finds the idea behind metaphysical analyticity, the idea of meaning as sole truthmaker, mysterious. Rather he states that even the truth of a claim like "Copper is copper" should be interpreted as in accord with the above scheme, where the general fact that everything is self-identical plays the role of non-linguistic truthmaker. Boghossian credits Quine with, in "Two Dogmas" and elsewhere, having demolished the metaphysical conception of analyticity, and the linguistic theory of necessity to which it gives rise (Boghossian 1996: 365).

Having agreed with Quine's attack on metaphysical analyticity, Boghossian proceeds to defend his conception of epistemic analyticity. The first question that arises concerns how it is possible that the truth of a sentence can be known just by knowing its meaning. Here there are two possible, and related, answers. The first rests on what Boghossian terms Frege-analyticity. A statement is Frege-analytic if, and only if, it is transformable into a logical truth by substituting synonyms for synonyms (Boghossian 1996: 366). This then raises the question as to the epistemic analyticity of logic itself. This rests on what Boghossian terms Carnap-analyticity. A statement is Carnap-analytic if, and only if, it functions as an implicit definition of its ingredient terms (Boghossian 1996: 368)[3].

Boghossian's task then becomes one of defending the concepts of Frege-analyticity and Carnap-analyticity from attack, or showing that such an attack presupposes, or leads to, meaning irrealism. He starts by considering Quine's objections to Frege-analyticity in "Two Dogmas". He states that Quine has been interpreted as defending either a non-factualism or error-thesis about analyticity. If one wishes to be a realist about meaning, then being a non-factualist about synonymy seems absurd. For, if there is a fact of the matter regarding what each expression means individually, then presumably a claim about whether another expression means the same can be true, or at least false (Boghossian 1996: 370). It is unclear how, in such a case, it is would be coherent to claim that there is simply no fact of the matter as to synonymy. Turning to the error-thesis, which Boghossian defines as the view that synonymy does concern determinate facts that are nomically impossible, i.e., necessarily uninstantiated (Boghossian 1996: 370), Boghossian first concedes that such a view does, at least seem logically possible. However, given that synonymy between two tokens of the same orthographic types is allowed, and that synonymy by explicit stipulation is allowed, albeit briefly, this seems unjustifiably *ad*

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[3] The doctrine of implicit definition can be traced back to Hilbert's (1988) *Foundations of Geometry* (originally published in 1899) in which he put forth his formalist conception of the axioms of geometry.

hoc. Coupled with the fact that the only argument for such a conclusion that has been given depends on Quinean meaning holism, which depends on the unpopular verificationist theory of meaning, no reason has been presented that would make such a view any more than *ad hoc* hand-waving (Boghossian 1996: 373).

Boghossian concludes that every principled objection to Frege-analyticity entails meaning irrealism, and proceeds to consider Carnap-analyticity). Carnap-analyticity depends on the idea of implicit definition, i.e., the idea that the logical constants acquire meaning by virtue of an arbitrary stipulation of certain sentences of logic as true. Simply put, a logical constant means that logical object, if any, that makes a certain argument-form valid (Boghossian 1996: 385).

Boghossian notes that, historically, the doctrine of implicit definition has been closely associated with logical non-factualism and conventionalism. He conjectures that much of the *animus* that Quine, and others, directed at the idea of implicit definition was, in fact, derived from a distaste for conventionalist and non-factualist understandings of logic (Boghossian 1996: 377). Boghossian wishes to argue that the close historical association between implicit definition and non-factualism and conventionalism is partly an accident, and that an acceptance of implicit definition does not force one to adopt either of these two positions[4].

Boghossian argues against the association between implicit definition and non-factualism by exploiting an analogy with Kripke's (1980) example in *Naming and Necessity* concerning the definition of "meter". In Kripke's example the term "meter" is defined by someone stating that a sentence proclaiming that a specific stick is a "meter" long at a specific time is to be true. Such a claim serves as an implicit definition, and yet it also expresses something factual. In a similar way there need be no inconsistency between holding a certain sentence of logic to be true serves to implicitly define a component logical constant of the sentence, and that the sentence expresses something factual (Boghossian 1996: 379).

The putative link between implicit definition and conventionalism is blocked in a similar way. Again using Kripke's (1980) example concerning "meter", it is evident that what is conventional about "meter" is not the truth-value of the proposition that is expressed by a certain sentence, but which proposition is being expressed by the sentence. The convention to regard the sentence as true determines the proposition expressed by the sentence, and the truth-value of this proposition is fixed by the facts (Boghossian 1996: 380)[5].

Despite Boghossian's argument that any fears concerning implicit definition that rests on supposedly conventionalist or non-factualist implications are unfounded, it still remains for him to consider arguments aimed at implicit definition as such. This he proceeds to do. The first objection that he considers is the famous one used in "Truth by Convention" (Quine 1936) to the effect that any adoption of implicit definitions would need to presuppose general conventions in order to cover an infinite number of instances. But such general conventions can

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[4] It should also be noted that, strictly speaking, non-factualism and conventionalism are inconsistent. Conventionalism claims that logic has truth-values and claims that convention is the source of these truth-values. Non-factualism denies the existence of truth-values as such (Boghossian 1996: 377).

[5] Boghossian (1996: 380) notes that it might be objected to his argument that it rests on a distinction between a 'sentence' and 'the proposition that the sentence expresses'. He admits that this may seem to be the case, but states that he only needs a version of the distinction between a sentence and what it expresses that even a deflationary view of truth would allow.

only be stated by using the logical constants themselves, and hence their meaning is already presupposed. An infinite regress ensues.

Boghossian admits that such an objection is valid if it is being assumed that such a convention would need to be explicitly stated in order for it to confer meaning on the logical constants. But he does not think that they need to be explicitly stated in order to do this, rather it is the case that the actor needs to, in some sense, be following a rule to the same effect (Boghossian 1996: 381).

Boghossian states that the issue of rule-following, as applied to implicit definition in order to fix meaning, now hinges on the possibility of what is often referred to as "conceptual role semantics" (Boghossian 1996: 382). The Quinean objection to an account of implicit definition in terms of rule-following, rather than explicit definition, now becomes the objection that the task of conceptual role semantics, namely that of distinguishing implicit definers from sentences that are not implicit definers, is impossible. Simply put, there is no way of distinguishing between sentences that are implicit definers and sentences that are highly obvious, non-defining sentences (Boghossian 1996: 383).

To this line of argument, however, Boghossian has a clear answer. If the meaning of the logical constants are to depend on their conceptual role, as is popularly thought, and no clear distinction can be drawn between implicit identifiers and Quinean 'obvieties', then the meaning of the logical constants themselves becomes indeterminate. Hence this argument against analyticity ultimately implies "the dreaded indeterminacy of meaning on which the critique of analyticity was supposed not to depend" (Boghossian 1996: 383).

This concludes Boghossian's case for his main conclusion, which is that the meaning realist is justified in using the notion of analyticity in order to explain our warrant for believing in the validity of logic. More detailed exposition that fills out this outline a bit will be given below, where I will give a qualified defense of his views.

3.   Objections to Boghossian's epistemic analyticity

3.1   Objection 1: The *a prioricity* of analyticity

The first objection that I will consider here is made in Margolis and Laurence (2001). They point out that Boghossian, in trying to defend epistemic analyticity as a route to *a priori* knowledge, would need to defend the claim that all of the premises necessary for such knowledge are *a priori* (Margolis & Laurence 2001: 296). But Boghossian tries to do this without specifying the theory of meaning that he wishes to defend, and "what if the facts about meaning are themselves empirical facts?" (Margolis & Laurence 2001: 296). *A priori* knowledge cannot be made to depend on *a posteriori* premises.

This issue is somewhat odd, in that Boghossian considers this objection, but hardly seems troubled. After stating that he has purposely avoided issues that pertain to meaning facts, he states that his "brief has been to defend epistemic analyticity, … and that this does not require showing that the knowledge of those meaning facts is itself *a priori"* (Boghossian 1996: 386).

Margolis and Laurence claim to be mystified by the above quotation, since this seems to commit Boghossian to the bizarre view that knowledge is *a priori* if it follows from premises,

independently of whether they are *a priori* or a *posteriori* (Margolis & Laurence 2001: 296). They admit that Quine would not object to Boghossian's claims based on the possibility of *a posteriori* meaning facts. But they rightly remark that this is beside the point, as "Boghossian's project isn't exegetical" (Margolis & Laurence 2001: 296). Rather he is trying to convince realists about meaning that they should accept epistemic analyticity, and among meaning realists the possibility of empirical meaning facts is very much a live option (Margolis & Laurence 2001: 300).

Margolis and Laurence (2001) must presumably be conceded their point that *a priori* knowledge cannot have *a posteriori* premises. However, they are unduly uncharitable in their construal of Boghossian's argument. Boghossian, when considering such an objection and as explained above, himself states that such an objection does not matter much, since his brief is to defend epistemic analyticity (Boghossian 1996: 386). The most sensible interpretation of his words – which Margolis and Laurence (2001: 296) find bizarre – would be to read him as saying that, even if it turns out that meaning facts are a *posteriori*, the notion of epistemic analyticity can still be cogent. It will just be the case that such analytic knowledge will not be *a priori*, but *a posteriori*. Boghossian is quite forthcoming about his support for conceptual role views of meaning in which "the *a priority* of synonymy is simply a by-product of the very nature of meaning facts" (Boghossian 1996: 367). But this is unrelated to his main task, which is to defend epistemic analyticity. He explicitly states that this is not a fundamental claim of his defense of epistemic analyticity (Boghossian 1996: 367). Rather he is trying to defend the idea that "*if* someone knows the relevant facts about meaning, *then* that person will be in a position to form a justified belief about their truth. It does not require showing that the knowledge of those meaning facts is itself *a priori*" (Boghossian 1996: 386).

The above quotation, which is part of the quotation given by Margolis and Laurence (2001: 296), can only be mystifying if one reads Boghossian's article as, in the first instance, an argument for *a priori* knowledge. But this goes against Boghossian's own words, as quoted above. Hence, if we admit that analytic knowledge would still be analytic, even if dependent on *a posteriori* meaning facts, and we read Boghossian as only defending analyticity, it must be concluded that the argument of Margolis and Laurence (2001) rests on conflating analyticity and the *a priori*, and has little force.

3.2   Objection 2: Synonymy with regards to tokens of the same word-type

The second objection that I will discuss concerns Boghossian's defence of Frege-analyticity. Variants of this argument have been repeated, and yet it seems to have little or no force. I will defend Boghossian against two variants of this argument; both of which seem to rest on a misunderstanding.

This part of the debate concerning analyticity concerns the possibility of being an error-theorist about Frege-analyticity. As explained earlier, this position states that, although analytic expresses a coherent, determinate property, this property is nomically impossible, i.e., necessarily uninstantiated (Boghossian 1996: 370). Harman (1996: 399) objects that Boghossian claims that "understanding of the sameness of sense of word tokens is enough for the sort of synonymy required for Frege-analyticity". Harman objects to this, since, in this context, talk about tokens of the same type being synonymous is equivalent to talking of instances of the same word being synonymous. This will clearly not do to defend Frege-

analyticity, since "what is needed is to replace one or more expressions with different expressions" (Harman 1996: 399).

Harman's (1996) point must surely be granted, in that Frege-analyticity requires different types to have the same sense. It is not sufficient that different tokens of the same type have the same sense. This does not affect Boghossian's argument, though, since Boghossian does not make the (patently false) claim that token-synonymy would be sufficient for Frege-analyticity. Rather he claims that the position that Quine (and others) endorses is *ad hoc*, in that there is no fundamental motivation for allowing synonymy between tokens of the same type (and with regard to stipulative definitions, albeit briefly), but withholding it from holding between different types. The following quotation makes this clear:

> [S]kepticism about synonymy has to boil down to the following somewhat peculiar claim: Although there is such a thing as the property of synonymy; and although it can be instantiated by pairs of tokens of the same orthographic types; and although it can be instantiated by pairs of tokens of distinct orthographic types, provided that they are related to each other by way of an explicit stipulation; it is, nevertheless, in principle impossible to generate this property in some other way… it is impossible that two expressions that were introduced independently of each other into the language, should have been introduced with exactly the same meanings.
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> (Boghossian 1996: 372)

The above quotation clearly illustrates the nature of Boghossian's' objection, and strongly indicates that Harman (1996) has misread him. He is not claiming that synonymy across tokens of the same type is *sufficient* for Frege-analyticity, rather he is claiming that endorsing such synonymy across tokens renders the denial of synonymy across types unjustifiably *ad hoc*. This is a more subtle argument than he is credited for by Harman, and Harman's objection leaves this argument untouched.

Margolis and Laurence (2001) make a related argument, though not one that rests on the same mistake. They interpret Boghossian correctly, i.e., as claiming that the above position is *ad hoc*, and proceed to claim that the above position, though they do not necessarily endorse it, does at least represent a *principled* stance.

Margolis and Laurence argue by noting that an acceptance of token-synonymy seems "perfectly natural", since "word meaning is assigned to types, not tokens" (Margolis & Laurence 2001: 300). This seems fair enough, but still does not explain why type-synonymy is impossible. They continue:

> [I]t is highly misleading to treat *sameness of meaning between two tokens of the same word type* and *sameness of meaning between two different word types as on a par*. The question of synonymy only arises across word types; sameness of meaning among tokens of a single word shouldn't have any bearing on the debate about synonymy and the existence of analyticities.
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> (Margolis & Laurence, 2001: 300-301)

It is unclear why the above amounts to principled stance in favour of the nomic impossibility of type-synonymy. At best it is an explanation of why token-synonymy is relatively

unproblematic. But this is not what is needed if the position of the error-theorist is to be saved from being *ad hoc*. What is needed is an argument for why the error-theorist holds the view that type-synonymy is necessarily uninstantiated. Boghossian states that the only argument in the literature in favour of the error-thesis is Quine's argument for meaning holism, which is presumably unpalatable since it rests on a verificationist view of meaning[6] (Boghossian 1996: 373). Neither Harman (1996), nor Margolis and Laurence (2001) remark on this in their criticism of Boghossian, and hence they do not succeed in showing that the error-thesis would represent a principled stance.

4.   Conclusion

Boghossian (1996) has, to my mind, a promising proposal for an improved, epistemic notion of analyticity. The critics discussed above interpret Boghossian in ways that unfairly facilitate the dismissal of his argument. Boghossian has shown that a meaning realist who wishes to deny the analytic/synthetic distinction needs to, at best, do a lot of work in order to justify holding these two positions concurrently.

More important than the above consideration is Boghossian's claim that the adoption of an epistemic notion of analyticity implies that the doctrine of implicit definition need not lead to non-factualism and conventionalism. If he is correct then we can have our cake and eat it too; an account of our warrant for believing the truths of logic can be given by appealing to epistemic analyticity, and yet we may be realists about logic. But such independence between the epistemology and ontology of logic, while an intriguing prospect, is not something that Boghossian has effectively established. It rests on his view of implicit definition, which remains (justifiably) contested.

The primary site of such contestation is Boghossian's claim, in answer to the Quinean point that implicit definitions assume the prior meaningfulness of the logical constants in order to be phrased as general truths, that such an objection can be overcome if we stop thinking in terms of explicit conventions and start thinking in terms of rule-following (Boghossian 1996: 382). The issue of rule-following, however, is notorious for the difficulties that it presents. Boghossian seems quite confident that his approach overcomes the Quinean objection, regardless of whether rule-following facts are understood as reducible to dispositional facts or not (Boghossian 1996: 382). Harman (1996: 396) does not share his confidence on this point, for it is not clear that this really disposes of Quine's challenge, or that the concept of disposition can do the required explanatory work. This is fair enough, Boghossian will need to show which conception of rule-following, if any, can do the work that he requires of it[7].

More importantly, Boghossian's argument has the effect of highlighting the deep difficulty faced by those who wish to deny that a coherent notion of analyticity exists, and yet wish to be realists about meaning. To my mind the burden of proof is on them; such theorists need to develop a notion of meaning on which meaning-facts exist, yet there cannot be true claims

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[6] Boghossian (1996: 373) also notes that this could not have been Quine's argument against Frege-analyticity, since it occurs at the end of "Two Dogmas" when the unpalatability of Frege-analyticity is already supposed to be established.

[7] This is, of course, not the only problem concerning the doctrine of implicit definition. Another potential obstacle would be the possibility of well-intentioned conventions turning out to be inconsistent, and, hence, without a coherent meaning (Margolis & Laurence 2001: 297).

about two meaning-facts being qualitatively identical (and without such a view taking Quinean indeterminacy for granted). Boghossian must surely be granted his claim about the intuitive implausibility of such a position, his article also shows that there is no quick way to overthrow this intuition.

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