Boghossian on analyticity

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1. Introduction

In an important recent discussion of analyticity, Paul Boghossian (1997)[1] argues for the following three claims:

 (i) While Quine's well-known arguments against analyticity do undermine one type of analyticity (what Boghossian calls *metaphysical analyticity*), they fail to undermine another type (what he calls *epistemic analyticity*).

 (ii) Epistemic analyticity explains the a prioricity of logic and perhaps even the a prioricity of conceptual truths.

 (iii) Epistemic analyticity can't be rejected short of embracing semantic irrealism.

If Boghossian is right, many contemporary philosophers are in trouble. For it's widely held that Quine's critique of analyticity was entirely successful, that analyticity can't vindicate claims to a priori knowledge, and that none of this has any bearing on whether meaning realism is a viable position.[2]

 While we find much to admire in Boghossian's paper – particularly the series of useful distinctions that he makes – we'll argue that his efforts to revive analyticity fall short. In particular, we'll argue that all three of his central claims are mistaken.

2. Metaphysical analyticity and epistemic analyticity are on a par

The most fundamental distinction that Boghossian introduces is between a metaphysical and an epistemological reading of analyticity. The first

[1] All references are to Boghossian 1997 unless otherwise noted.

[2] See, for example, Fodor & Lepore 1992, Harman 1999, and Lycan 1994.

concerns what makes a statement true; the second, what accounts for our being justified in believing it's true. The two can be put as follows:

Metaphysical Analyticity

A statement, S, is *metaphysically analytic* iff S is true solely in virtue of its meaning.

Epistemic Analyticity

A statement, S, is *epistemically analytic* iff grasp of the meaning of S suffices for justified belief in the truth of S.[3]

Boghossian endorses Quine's critique of analyticity as applied to the metaphysical version of analyticity – but not the epistemic one.

Boghossian's main argument against metaphysical analyticity is based on the truism that the truth of a statement turns both on what it means *and* on whether what it means is the case; that is, that for any statement S, S is true iff, for some p, S means that p, and p. '[H]ow could the mere fact that S means that p make it the case that S is true? Doesn't it also have to be the case that p?' (335). Boghossian also quotes Gilbert Harman who notes (in explicating Quine) that rather than saying that the statement *copper is copper* is true in virtue of meaning alone, we might instead say that it is true because of 'a very general feature of the way the world is, namely, that everything is self-identical' (335). Harman's point is that there *is* an independent fact here – albeit one that's very general and quite obvious – and that appealing to analyticity to explain the truth of the statement does no explanatory work.

We agree that the case against metaphysical analyticity is compelling. But the problem for Boghossian is that these very considerations extend to epistemic analyticity as well. After all, if p really is an independent fact that makes S true, then just knowing that S means that p couldn't suffice for the needed justification; one would also need to be justified in believing that p. In other words, so long as the truth of S isn't merely a matter of what it means, then grasping its meaning can only be (at best) part of the story about why one is justified in holding it to be true. The other part – and by far the more important part – concerns one's epistemic access to p itself and why one is justified in believing p.

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[3] Boghossian's notion of epistemic analyticity is close to some traditional notions of the a priori. However, Boghossian's own characterization of a prioricity is that 'to say that T knows p a priori is to say that T's warrant for holding S true is independent of outer experience' (333). So for Boghossian the crucial difference between a prioricity and epistemic analyticity is that the latter turns on grasping meaning, whereas the former does not. As an anonymous referee points out, without such a difference, Boghossian's project is in danger of 'explaining' the a prioricity of logic by appealing to the a prioricity of logic.

3. Boghossian's strategy for explaining the a prioricity of logic

Within the category of epistemic analyticity, Boghossian draws another distinction – between Frege-analyticity and Carnap-analyticity.

Frege-analyticity

A statement is *Frege-analytic* when its 'analyticity (in my epistemological sense) is to be explained by the fact that it is transformable into a logical truth by substitution of synonyms for synonyms' (337; italics removed).

Carnap-analyticity

A statement is *Carnap-analytic* when it is part of an implicit definition of certain of its component terms (see 339).

Ultimately, Boghossian wants to defend both of these, but clearly the first won't do in accounting for the a prioricity of logic; logical statements satisfy it trivially. So Boghossian's treatment of logic comes down to the claim that logical statements – in particular, the simplest and most basic logical statements – are Carnap-analytic. How is Boghossian's explanation supposed to work?

He offers a schematic argument, where A is the target logical statement containing the logical constant C (357):

(1) If logical constant C is to mean what it does, then argument-form A has to be valid, for C means whatever logical object in fact makes A valid.
(2) C means what it does. Therefore,
(3) A is valid.

(1) is supposed to express the implicit definition of C; that is, A is Carnap-analytic because C owes its meaning to the stipulation that C means the logical object that makes A valid.

Now one way to turn this argument into an account of the a prioricity of logic is to maintain that the premises are themselves a priori. If one can know a priori what C means and also know a priori that its meaning is constitutively linked to the validity of A, then it would appear that one could be justified in accepting A on purely a priori grounds. Interestingly, however, Boghossian doesn't embrace this strategy. Though he thinks that the meaning facts implicated in his schema are a priori, he says he doesn't need to rely on their being so. Rather, what he does is claim that 'knowing the meaning' of an item includes knowing how its meaning is fixed. In this case, knowing the meaning of A involves three things: knowing the meaning of its component, C, knowing how C's meaning is fixed, and knowing that this establishes the validity of A. In this way, knowing the meaning of A, in Boghossian's extended sense, suffices for one's justification in accepting it, and A is epistemically analytic.

4. Problems with Boghossian's account of the a prioricity of logic

4.1. The premisses need to be a priori

One puzzling feature of Boghossian's account is why he claims that the pre-
misses of his argument needn't be a priori. The problem is that the epis-
temic status of the conclusion depends crucially on the epistemic status of
the premisses. If the premisses aren't themselves a priori, then, even if the
conclusion follows, one wouldn't have the needed a priori justification in
believing the conclusion just on the basis of the premisses. Boghossian is
surprisingly indifferent to this concern. He suggests that it's beside the
point, since it is still the case that on the basis of knowing 'the meaning' of
S one is thereby justified in accepting it:

> I have purposely avoided discussing all issues relating to knowledge of
> meaning facts. My brief here has been to defend epistemic analyticity;
> and this requires showing only that certain sentences are such that,
> *if* someone knows the relevant facts about their 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 ... (357)

But what if facts about meaning are themselves empirical facts?
Boghossian seems to be committed to the bizarre view that, despite this
possibility, the conclusion is knowable a priori simply because it follows
from the premisses. That's like saying that the conclusion *John is taller than
Bill* can be known a priori since *if* someone knows that John is 6′10″ and
that Bill is 6′9″, *then* she'd be in a position to form the justified belief that
John is taller than Bill. But clearly such justification is a posteriori.

Perhaps Boghossian isn't too worried about this sort of possibility
because he thinks Quine himself wouldn't take seriously the prospect that
meaning facts are empirical. But since Boghossian's project isn't exegetical,
it doesn't really matter what Quine would or wouldn't say. As Boghossian
emphasizes, his concern is less with Quine than with contemporary
philosophers who share Quine's scepticism about analyticity but not his
meaning irrealism. Among these philosophers, it's very much a live option
that meaning facts are empirical.

4.2. Is premiss (2) a priori?

In any event, Boghossian's allowance that his premisses needn't be a priori
is half-hearted. He goes on to defend the a prioricity of his second premiss
against a familiar objection that has been remarked upon by a number of
writers going back all the way to Quine's critique of 'truth by convention'.
The problem is that the conventional assignments of truth needn't actually

guarantee truth. As Paul Benacerraf and Hilary Putnam put it, 'Everything "true by convention" is supposed to be true. But conventions, however well-intentioned, can turn out to be inconsistent' (1964/1983: 23). The difficulty is that inconsistent conventions would leave a statement without a coherent meaning and without the ability to be true. The implication for Boghossian's argument is that the a prioricity of premiss (2) is in jeopardy; it might turn out that C doesn't even have a meaning.

Boghossian's response to this threat is a kind of transcendental argument. He claims that we are justified in believing that the demands on our logical constants aren't inconsistent since it can't be coherently doubted that they are. In particular, Boghossian suggests that there are two strategies that a sceptic about logic might take. The first is to assert something along the lines of (4) or (5), yet this obviously relies on the meaningfulness of the logical constants (360).

(4) $\forall x$ (If x is a token of 'not', then x does not have a meaning)
(5) $\forall x$ (If x is a token of 'if, then', then x does not have a meaning).

The second is to introduce *new* logical constants and use those to express the fact that the old ones aren't meaningful, e.g.:

(6) $\forall x$ (If x is a token of 'not', then x does not_{NEW} have a meaning).[4]

Yet in order to introduce the new logical constants, one would have to presuppose the meaningfulness of the old ones. For instance, one would need a rule like (7) (361):

(7) $\forall x$ (If x is a token of 'not_{NEW}', then x is subject to rules R1, R2, R3 and no others).

Clearly principles like these rely on the meaningfulness of at least some of the old constants.

Unfortunately, there are a number of problems with Boghossian's argument here. One is that the argument only establishes at most that there are pragmatic constraints on denying that the logical constants have a meaning. Just because we can't claim that they don't, doesn't thereby guarantee that they do. In fact, one way to show that there is no guarantee is to reformulate (4) and (5) using a different meta-language (so that the object-language and the meta-language aren't the same):

(8) $\forall x$ (Si x est une occurrence de 'not', alors x n'a pas de sens)
(9) $\forall x$ (Si x est une occurrence de 'if, then', alors x n'a pas de sens).

Clearly, (8) and (9) are pragmatically unassailable, neither relying on the meaningfulness of 'not' or 'if, then'.

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[4] For purposes of consistency, we have slightly modified (6) from Boghossian's original.

A related problem is that it's not mandatory that scepticism about the logical constants be expressed in the way that Boghossian suggests (viz. (4) and (5)). So, for example, (4) might be reformulated as (10):

(10) $\forall x$ (If x is a token of 'not', then x is meaningless).

It's hardly clear that this claim is incoherent. Boghossian might claim that (10) entails (4), but notice that he would need to establish this in a way that doesn't beg the question. In particular, he can't assume that the entailment is analytic, given that the existence of analyticity is in question.

Finally, Boghossian's objection to (6) also fails. He assumes that the new constants would have to be introduced by explicit definition. But there is no reason why the definitions couldn't be implicit, relying on conceptual role to fix their meaning, just as Boghossian himself argues must be so with the standard logical constants (see 353).

The upshot of these objections is that Boghossian's defence of the a prioricity of (2) falls flat. That C is governed by certain (implicit) rules of use doesn't warrant one's holding that it even has a meaning.[5] The rules might very well be inconsistent with one another. The situation is that while Boghossian needs (1) and (2) – the premises of his argument – to be a priori, his explicit defence of (2) is fraught with difficulties.[6]

4.3. The epistemology of logic v. the epistemology of content

We come now to what is perhaps the most fundamental problem with Boghossian's program. This is that his account of how logical statements are justified involves an epistemic contortion, making what we are epistemically most confident about (logic) depend on one of the things we are epistemically the least confident about (the nature of content). Theories of content remain enormously controversial and it's fair to say that there isn't one theory worked out in any real detail. If the justification of logical statements were really dependent on the prior justification of our theories of

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[5] There also appears to be the possibility that the principles governing logical constants might have incompatible specifications, just as the following do, though each is consistent taken on its own.

Bachelor $=_{df}$ unmarried man such that 'mother' expresses no meaning
Mother $=_{df}$ female parent such that 'bachelor' expresses no meaning

[6] What about premiss (1)? Boghossian is committed to the idea that not only is some form of conceptual role semantics the correct account of the meaning of logical constants but also that in knowing the meaning of a constant one knows this and can do so on a priori grounds. Notice that this is a particularly tendentious claim to maintain in the present context. Contemporary Quineans about analyticity may agree that some form of conceptual role semantics is likely for the logical constants, but they tend to hold this not on a priori grounds, but rather on broadly explanatory grounds. (See, for example, Block 1986, Fodor 1990, and Harman 1999.)

content, then logic would have little epistemic authority. This is surely reason enough to think that epistemic analyticity isn't the key to explaining the a prioricity of logic.

5. *The rejection of analyticity does not imply semantic irrealism*

Let's turn to Boghossian's third claim, that Quine's rejection of analyticity implies semantic irrealism. Boghossian's focus in this part of his paper is the notion of Frege-analyticity understood as an account of epistemic analyticity. His aim is to show that there is no case to be made against Frege-analyticity so long as one is a realist about meaning. To be sure, Frege-analyticity isn't worth much if it can't be supplemented with an account of the a prioricity of logic, and we've just seen that Boghossian's account of logic is seriously flawed. However, we can put aside the arguments of the last section to see whether Boghossian's defence of Frege-analyticity (modulo his account of logic) is defensible.

His argument begins with the important observation that Quine's famous rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction can be interpreted in a number of ways. Boghossian focuses on two interpretations that are closely connected to semantic irrealism:

Non-factualism about analyticity (NF)

'No coherent, determinate property is expressed by the predicate "is analytic" (or, since these are correlative terms, the predicate "is synthetic"); consequently, no coherent proposition is expressed by sentences of the form "S is analytic" and "S is synthetic"'. (340)

Error Thesis about analyticity (ET)

'There is a coherent, determinate property expressed by "is analytic", but it is necessarily uninstantiated; consequently, all sentences of the form "S is analytic" are necessarily false.' (341)

Here's how Boghossian argues that (NF) implies semantic irrealism. He claims that if one is a non-factualist about Frege-analyticity, then this means that one has to be a non-factualist about either logic or synonymy. But since logic isn't up for grabs, the culprit must be synonymy. Semantic irrealism follows, since anyone who is a semantic realist ought to allow for the possibility of two expressions having the very same meaning – a possibility that non-factualism about synonymy precludes.

The problem with this argument is that it neglects some crucial features of Boghossian's account of Frege-analyticity. Frege-analyticity is supposed to provide an explanation of how grasping a statement's meaning alone may suffice for being justified in believing it. The full version of such an explanation should be something like this: *A statement, S, is Frege-analytic just in case its epistemic analyticity can be explained by the following facts:*

(i) there are synonyms such that (ii) S is transformable into a logical truth by substitution of synonyms for synonyms, (iii) the facts about synonymy are knowable a priori, and (iv) so are the facts about logical truth. Given this more explicit account, it is clear that it's open to the non-factualist about Frege-analyticity to opt for a different culprit than the one Boghossian cites on her behalf. She could say, instead, that the problem is with (iii), for example, that there is no fact of the matter about whether synonyms are knowable a priori. We take it that this possibility is a live option,[7] so as things stand (NF) may very well be consistent with semantic realism.

Boghossian's argument against (ET) is that the position that the error theorist ends up endorsing is ad hoc. The error theorist rejects the nomological possibility of synonyms. At the same time, if she follows Quine, she has to admit that tokens of the same orthographic type can be synonymous and also that stipulations can generate synonyms (at least at the time the stipulation is made).[8] The resulting thesis is a modified version of (ET), namely:

> 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 type; 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 instances of this property in some other way, via some other mechanism. (344)

Boghossian writes as if it goes without saying that the modified version of (ET) is ad hoc, but that really isn't so. First, it's perfectly natural for someone who is otherwise sceptical about synonymy to note that tokens of the same type may be synonymous, since word meaning is assigned to types not tokens. Perhaps error theorists shouldn't claim that orthographic types are invariably synonymous, given the possibility of homonyms, but it is hardly an arbitrary concession for them to note that tokens of the same *word* type are synonymous. Indeed, it 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

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[7] A Quinean might argue for it, for example, by claiming that since confirmation is holistic, there is no fact of the matter as to what's a priori and a posteriori, and so there is no fact about whether such purported facts about synonymy are knowable a priori. In any case, Boghossian has said nothing to rule out the possibility of rejecting (iii).

[8] Boghossian notes that the first qualification follows from Quine's characterization of logical truth (according to which a logical truth is one that remains true under every interpretation of its non-logical constituents), and the second from Quine's discussion of stipulative definition in 'Two Dogmas'.

tokens of a single word type shouldn't have any bearing on the debate about synonymy and the existence of analyticities. Second, it's also not an arbitrary concession for error theorists to note that explicit stipulations bring with them a limited amount of synonymy. Explicit stipulations are exceptional in that they are introduced with the very purpose of establishing synonyms. If anything would be a reasonable exception to (ET), this would be it.[9] However, words are rarely introduced by explicit stipulation; language in general doesn't work this way. Moreover, as Quine himself points out, in the normal course of events when a word gets taken up into the language, the original 'definition' loses its stipulative character. So whatever synonymies may be generated by stipulation, they are fleeting anyway.[10] In short, the exceptions the error theorist allows appear to be principled, not ad hoc.

We see no reason why a meaning realist couldn't at the same time reject Frege-analyticity.

6. *Conclusion*

Boghossian's aim is to re-establish the significance of analyticity for contemporary semantic realists who wish to embrace Quine's critique of the analytic-synthetic distinction. We conclude, however, that all three of Boghossian's main claims are mistaken. Epistemic analyticity is entirely on a par with metaphysical analyticity, the a prioricity of logic can't be explained in terms of epistemic analyticity, and semantic realism is perfectly consistent with the rejection of analyticity.[11]

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[9] It's not even clear, though, that stipulations are capable of introducing epistemic analyticities, for, as we noted earlier, stipulations face the risk of inconsistency.

[10] We take it that these considerations tell against Grice & Strawson's well-known criticism of Quine that in 'Two dogmas' he admits that conventional stipulations generate analyticities (Grice & Strawson 1956: 152–53). We agree that Quine's remarks to this effect are somewhat puzzling, but it isn't as though he lacks the resources to diminish, or even reject, the significance of conventional stipulation.

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