KAMIL CEKIERA
ORCID: 0000-0002-9047-2196
Uniwersytet Wrocławski

Thought Experiments and Conceptual Analysis in Ethics[*]

Abstract: In recent years a lot of metaphilosophical attention has been paid to the role of thought experiments in philosophical inquiry. According to the popular picture, thought experiments are among the most prominent methods for conceptual analysis. However, it is also often claimed that thought experiments in ethics differ from those that are used in other fields of philosophy as being of a different nature—they are not about the concepts, but rather about the things in the world (what those things exactly are depends on the particular metaethical theory one subscribes to). In the paper I argue that this claim is wrong. Conceptual analysis is of a huge value to ethics for it substantially helps to clarify the concepts one uses while making a moral judgment. It is very often the case that the apparent moral disagreement between two subjects turns out to be superficial since it is rooted in the misunderstanding on the conceptual level, for example when one uses some concept equivocally. Moreover, through thought experiments conceptual analysis can help to bring out the tacit assumptions that relate to the concepts involved.

Keywords: thought experiments, conceptual analysis, intuition, disagreement, concepts

Introduction

This paper concerns the role of conceptual analysis and thought experiments altogether in the ethical enterprise. Despite the importance of conceptual analysis in contemporary philosophy, its role in ethics is mostly neglected. I am going to try to fill this gap a bit arguing that conceptual analysis can play a significant role in ethics.

The paper is divided into four sections. The initial three are supposed to set the theoretical ground for understanding what I take conceptual analysis and thought experiments to be. In the first section I briefly consider what concepts and conceptual analysis are. In the second one, I try to present a model of conceptual analysis which makes a huge use of thought experiments serving as a tool for figuring out the concept application. The third section is devoted to a particular version of that model in which the judgements on concept application are understood as expressions of norms. Finally, the fourth section moves those considerations into ethical ground. It is divided into two parts. In the first, I focus on the general use of conceptual analysis in ethics as a tool for clarification of relevant concepts. In the second, I show how (some) ethical thought experiments might be understood as being about concepts.

1. Conceptual analysis and concepts

Conceptual analysis is one of the essential methods of analytic philosophy. A bold statement such as this can easily be supported once we take a look at the history of 20th century analytic philosophy. One of its godfathers, George Edward Moore, in his reminiscent remarks on his early philosophy suggested that the analysis mentioned in the "analytic philosophy" label was primarily aimed at concepts. Thus although he admits that initially he used not to "distinguish clearly between *defining* a word or other verbal expression and *defining* a concept,"[1] it is the latter that is a subject of the sort of analysis he had pursued: "[w]hen I have talked of analysing anything, *what* I have talked of analysing has always been an idea or concept or proposition, and *not* a verbal expression."[2]

Even though philosophers generally acknowledge the importance of conceptual analysis as a analytic philosophy's methodology, there is no single, universal definition of conceptual analysis that every philosopher would subscribe to. Conceptual analysis can be pursued in a variety of ways. One may for instance envision a form of analysis of a concept that breaks it down into its logical components, or look at how people actually apply concepts by observing competent language-speakers performance. However one does come about performing conceptual analysis, its crucial aim is to clarify the meaning of a given concept. There is, however, a significant obstacle here. The meaning of a concept is by and large shaped by the linguistic performance, therefore it calls for a need of a close examination of the empirical

---

[1] G.E. Moore, "A Reply to My Critics," [in:] *The Library of Living Philosophers: The Philosophy of G.E. Moore*, P.A. Schilpp (ed.), New York 1942, p. 665.

[2] Ibidem, p. 661.

work on how concept are actually used. On the other hand, the meaning of the concept is very often opaque in the sense that it is indeterminate and ambiguous, therefore it also takes a lot of armchair work to figure out what the norms of the usage of the concepts are. It is thus an interplay between the actual language-speakers performance and the norms of the concept application that eventually carve the meaning of the concept.

One may worry at this point that the foregoing remarks equate concepts with words. It is not so, however. Although the answer to the long-running philosophical question of the nature of concept is beyond the scope of this paper, a few fairly uncontroversial comments on what I take concept to be are in order. Firstly, concepts are not linguistic entities but are expressed by words. In this sense concepts are understood to "correlate at the level of thought with word meaning"[3] so the proper way of interpreting the phrase 'meaning of a concept' is 'meaning of the words that express (given) concept.' As entities operating on the level of thought, concepts are in the intermediate position between words and the world. On the one hand, then, conceptual analysis aims at linguistic or semantic analysis since the only way to express concept is through language. At the same time concepts, as Hans-Johann Glock observes while commenting on Wittgenstein's idea (taken with a 'Kantian twist'), "are techniques not just for using words, but for mental operations or mental acts which may or may not be expressed in language."[4] This kind of mental activity has a different direction of fit—after all "[c]oncepts are just ways of thinking of things."[5] Thus, on the other hand, the aim of conceptual analysis is "to report discoveries about the [...] *world*. The optimistic thought that this could be achieved [is] a corollary of the view that our concepts [are] the *mirror* of reality."[6] My final assumption, following Nicholas Laskowski and Stephen Finlay, is that concepts "are psychological *types* of some kind rather than tokens [...] and therefore that different people can share the same concept."[7]

2. Conceptual analysis and thought experiments

Although the term itself might suggest otherwise, there is no single way of executing conceptual analysis. In the remainder of the text I will focus mostly on conceptual analysis that makes use of thought experiments (or broadly the method of cases). Nothing hinges here on what exactly one takes thought experiments to be, so the terms 'thought experiments,' 'method of cases,' 'hypothetical scenarios' and the like will be used more or less interchangeably.

---

[3] K. Ludwig, "The Epistemology of Thought Experiments: First Person versus Third Person Approaches," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 31 (2007), p. 129.

[4] H.-J. Glock, "A Cognitivist Approach to Concepts," *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 82 (2011), p. 136.

[5] E.J. Lowe, "Grasp of Essences versus Intuitions: An Unequal Contest," [in:] *Intuition*, A.R. Booth, D.P. Rowbottom (eds.), Oxford 2014, p. 256.

[6] C. Sandis, "The Experimental Turn and Ordinary Language," *Essays in Philosophy* 11 [2] (2010), p. 183, italics original.

[7] N. Laskowski, S. Finlay, "Conceptual Analysis in Metaethics," [in:] *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics*, T. McPherson, D. Plunkett (eds.), New York–London 2018, p. 536, italics original.

A lot of theoretical attention has been recently paid to the nature, functions, and problems of thought experiments.[8] There are a couple of reasons for that methodological outburst. Firstly, thought experiments played a major role in philosophy arguably since its very beginning[9] and through its entire history. Despite that profound influence on philosophical practice, they were mostly used unreflectively and very often without the appropriate self-awareness. In short, there was never a theory of thought experiment that would do justice to what it *actually* is. Secondly, once philosophers began to realise the merits of thought experiments, they became wary of its flaws as well. There are several problems associated with thought experiments that are discussed in current literature. For example, one may worry about the problem of informativeness of thought experiments:[10] how is it possible to gain some new information in the course of executing thought experiments given that there is no empirical input (which is critical to a real experiment)? Another problem has been famously posed by Daniel Dennett:[11] thought experiments are prone to be presented in the misleading way, such that the experimenter is already convinced for the conclusion he is trying to argue for and hence arrange the thought experiment only to "pump someone's intuition" in a certain direction (therefore Dennett dubs such thought experiments 'intuition pumps'). Finally thirdly, a lot of discussions on the epistemic status of thought experiments have been provoked by experimental philosophy, a relatively fresh movement in philosophy aimed at testing philosophers' intuition empirically. Experimental philosophers argue that instead of relying solely on philosophers' intuitive answers to thought experiments we would be better off confronting them with laypeople's answers. Borrowing Kirk Ludwig's terminology, experimental philosophy tries to supplement the traditional, first-person approach to thought experiment with the third-person approach.[12] Experimental philosophy has been put under vigorous attack, being criticised for both its methods[13] and aims.[14] This discussion, how-

---

[8] See for instance: R. Sorensen, *Thought Experiments*, Oxford 1992; J.R. Brown, *The Laboratory of the Mind: Thought Experiments in the Natural Sciences*, London–New York 1991; J.D. Norton, "Are Thought Experiments Just What You Thought," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 [3] (1996); T.S. Gendler, *Thought Experiment: On the Power and Limits of Imaginary Cases*, New York 2000; S. Häggqvist, "A Model for Thought Experiments," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 39 [1] (2009); N.K. Shinod, "Why Thought Experiments Do Have a Life of Their Own: Defending the Autonomy of Thought Experimentation Method," *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 34 [1] (2017); D. Dennett, *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*, New York–London 2013; *The Routledge Companion to Thought Experiments*, M.T. Stuart, Y. Fehige, J.R. Brown (eds.), New York–London 2017.

[9] Examples of thought experiments in the pre-socratic era are presented in e.g. N. Rescher, "Thought Experimentation in Presocratic Philosophy," [in:] *Thought Experiments in Science and Philosophy*, T. Horowitz, G.J. Massey, New York–London 1991.

[10] See: E. Brendel, "Intuition Pumps and the Proper Use of Thought Experiment," *Dialectica* 58 [1] (2004).

[11] D. Dennett, "The Milk of Human Intentionality," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3 [3] (1980).

[12] K. Ludwig, "The Epistemology of Thought Experiments...," passim.

[13] E.g. A. Kauppinen, "The Rise and Fall of Experimental Philosophy," *Philosophical Explorations* 10 [2] (2007).

[14] E.g. M. Deutsch, *The Myth of the Intuitive: Experimental Philosophy and Philosophical Method*, Cambridge 2015.

ever, bounced back to the traditional, or so-called "armchair," philosophy as well, resulting in the growing number of papers where traditional philosophers tried to rethink their own methodology.

Just as there is no single method of conceptual analysis, there are different kinds of thought experiments, each serving a different purpose and accordingly varied. However, although thought experiments are not the sole method of conceptual analysis, and, likewise, conceptual analysis is not the sole aim of thought experiments, there certainly is an overlap. It is a common practice of contemporary philosophy to test correctness of a proposed analysis of a concept (frequently expressed by the set of jointly necessary and sufficient conditions) by confronting it with a hypothetical case to check whether the concept in question applies to this particular scenario. Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols characterise this method in a following way:

> typically a conceptual analysis attempts to identify precisely the meaning of a concept by breaking the concept into its essential components, components which themselves typically involve further concepts. In an attempt to determine the meaning of a philosophically important concept, one often considers whether the concept applies in various possible cases.[15]

Typically, the answer to the question of whether in fact a given concept applies is yielded by intuition.[16] The process, thus, requires imagining a scenario described by a thought experiment and delivering the intuitive answer as to its applicability:

Once an analysis is proposed, it must survive the method of possible cases. Various hypothetical scenarios are imagined, ones that need no more than bare logical possibility, and we consult our intuitions as to whether the analysis is applicable in the imagined scenario.[17]

Hence the standard usage of conceptual analysis via thought experiments can be reconstructed as proceeding through the following steps:

1. Analysed concept p being stated
2. Set of necessary and sufficient conditions/definition
3. Scenario S in which conditions are met
4. Does p apply in S?

The first step is just to state the subject of analysis, i.e. the concept in question. In the second step that concept is analysed and broken down into smaller components, usually in form of the set of jointly necessary and sufficient conditions,

---

[15] J. Knobe, S. Nichols, "An Experimental Philosophy Manifesto," [in:] *Experimental Philosophy*, J. Knobe, S. Nichols (eds.), New York 2008, p. 4.

[16] Although this metaphilosophical picture seems to be uncontroversial, Stephen Stich and Kevin Tobia wisely observed that "it would be better to say 'largely uncontroversial,' since in philosophy almost nothing is uncontroversial;" S. Stich, K. Tobia, "Experimental Philosophy and the Philosophical Tradition," [in:] *A Companion to Experimental Philosophy*, J. Sytsma, W. Buchwalter (eds.), Hoboken 2016, p. 17. In recent years several authors opposed the view that intuition plays any significant role in assessing the results of thought experiments (see especially H. Cappelen, *Philosophy without Intuitions*, New York 2012; M. Deutsch, *The Myth of the Intuitive*, passim). This particular issue is insignificant for the rest of the paper so I will simply follow the majority and call the judgment on thought experiment 'intuition.' However, one can easily replace it with one's preferred notion.

[17] S.D. Hales, *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy*, Cambridge 2006, p. 16.

sometimes in a more informal manner. The third step encapsulates the actual thought experiments. The fourth step is crucial, as the intuition on whether the concept applies is what the entire analysis hinges on.

This way of doing conceptual analysis is prevalent in contemporary philosophy and one can easily find a handful of examples to support that claim. However, just as conceptual analysis is not a present-day invention, neither is the method reconstructed above. Once again, it actually goes back to the ancient origins of philosophy. To illustrate it, consider the following passage from Plato's *Republic* in which Socrates discusses with Cephalus on what is justice:

as concerning justice, what is it?—to speak the truth and to pay your debts—no more than this? And even to this are there not exceptions? Suppose that a friend when in his right mind has deposited arms with me and he asks for them when he is not in his right mind, ought I to give them back to him? No one would say that I ought or that I should be right in doing so, any more than they would say that I ought always to speak the truth to one who is in his condition.

You are quite right, he replied.

But then, I said, speaking the truth and paying your debts is not a correct definition of justice.

Quite correct, Socrates.[18]

As we can readily see, Socrates follows all of the aforementioned steps. Firstly, the concept under scrutiny (justice) is stated, then Socrates considers its proposed definitions (in the form of two conditions) and confronts it with an imaginary scenario. The intuitive verdict on whether the concept of justice applies in the scenario is negative (*no one would say that I ought*), hence the proposed analysis of the concept of justice is not the correct one.

The excerpt from *The Republic* showcases the method in a clear way. Structurally similar examples from philosophical texts can be multiplied, nonetheless philosophers do not always proceed in the exact same manner. However, one important conclusion is that thought experiments play a significant role in a considerably large number of conceptual analyses. As was suggested, a decisive point is the one in which philosopher make an intuitive judgement on whether the concept applies in the particular case. This issue will be addressed in the next section.

3. Thought experiments and norms

The nature of intuitive judgement on thought experiment and its role in philosophy has become a vibrant topic in the contemporary metaphilosophy. The main reason for that was mentioned earlier—the rise of experimental philosophy. Since experimental philosophers[19] put the epistemic credence of relying on philosopher's own intuition under attack and instead proposed conducting surveys that are supposed to empirically show how the actual pattern of intuitive responses to thought experiments among folks looks like, the defenders of the traditional method responded in the myriad of papers on that topic.

---

[18] Plato, *The Republic*, transl. B. Jowett, 1901, 331b–331d, spacing added. Web edition at: http://studymore.org.uk/xpla0.htm (accessed: 10.11.2020), Stephanus page numbers used.

[19] Actually, this remark concerns mostly the so-called negative program of experimental philosophy.

One of the main motivation for experimental philosophy's program is usually set forth in the following way. Philosophers are used to construing fanciful thought experiments that are supposed to yield certain intuitions. Those intuitions are then treated as evidence for particular philosophical theories. But how do we know which of two conflicting intuitions is the right one? The best indicator is the degree to which given intuition is shared by others. When it comes to (ordinary) concepts, there simply seems to be no better way to figure out their meaning than to check how they are commonly used. Armchair philosophers, the dialectic goes, do nothing else than assume that their intuitions are commonly shared. Moreover, this notion is very often explicitly stated in utterances like *everyone would agree that…* or *everyone would say that…*—indeed, such an utterance is present even in the passage from *The Republic* quoted above, when Plato assumes that *no one would say that…* However, this assumption is not backed up by any actual studies on how people use given concept while those utterances are plainly empirical assumptions that can be (relatively) effortlessly tested. Consequently, instead of relying on their own intuitions, experimental philosophers run vignette studies to find out what people's intuitive answers to philosophically salient thought experiments are. What might seem worrisome for those who adhere to the traditional method of philosophy is that the results not only suggest a discrepancy between the answers, but also point to a pattern of disagreement that is influenced by the factors that are irrelevant from the philosophical point of view—such as cultural background,[20] gender,[21] socio-economic status[22] and others.

According to this view, question asked by (most of the) thought experiments come down to the question of the phrase *what would you say*. That, in turn, may suggest a connotation between experimental philosophy's program and one of the classical approach to conceptual analysis in the 20th century analytic philosophy: Oxford's ordinary language philosophy, represented most notably by John Austin, Peter Strawson and Gilbert Ryle. In the vein of Wittgenstein's famous remark that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language"[23] Oxford's philosophers were focusing on the ordinary usage of language instead of the logical 'armchair' analysis. Notwithstanding the resemblance, as Constantine Sandis argues, there is not much in common between experimental philosophy and the ordinary language school. For while experimental philosophers are interested in the *actual* use of concepts, ordinary language philosophy "by contrast, is not interested in what the majority of people happen to think at any given time and place but, rather, in objective facts about linguistic norms."[24] Oxford's philosophers, then, were not

---

[20] E.g. J.M. Weinberg, S. Nichols, S. Stich, "Normativity and Epistemic Intuition," *Philosophical Topics* 29 [1–2] (2001).

[21] E.g. W. Buckwalter, S. Stich, "Gender and Philosophical Intuition," [in:] *Experimental Philosophy*, vol. 2, J. Knobe, S. Nichols (eds.), New York 2014.

[22] E.g. E. Machery, R. Mallon, S. Nichols, S. Stich, "Semantics Cross-Cultural Style," *Cognition* 92 [3] (2004).

[23] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, revised 4th edition, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, J. Schulte, Oxford 1953/2009, p. 25e, §43.

[24] C. Sandis, "The Experimental Turn and Ordinary Language," p. 185.

concerned about the way people apply concepts but, instead, about the norms of concepts' application.

In her book, Serena Maria Nicoli extends this view to the general claim about the intuitive judgements in thought experiments. According to her main thesis, thought experiments in philosophy function as a yardstick for the norms of a concept's application. Thus, confronted with an imaginary scenario "claiming that this Y would (or wouldn't) be called 'X' amounts to claiming that, in such a case, 'X' should (or shouldn't) be used to refer to Y."[25] It is so because intuitive judgement on thought experiment "aims to convey a prescription, not (just) a description of some state of affairs."[26] Philosophers are in the right position to make such normative judgements because of their expertise in the field which stems from being, among others, more reflective, competent, acquainted with a bulk of similar cases, appropriately trained and so forth. On the basis of that, Nicoli undermines the relevance of experimental philosophy for the philosophical inquiry and sees it as an utterly misguided enterprise.[27]

It is worth noticing that from time to time philosophers are overt about their normative purpose of using hypothetical scenarios. For instance, in their esteemed paper *The Extended Mind* Andy Clark and David Chalmers argue for active externalism—the idea that environment plays an important cognitive role and therefore mind should not be understood as being only 'in the head.' One crucial point in their line of argumentation is a thought experiment in which we are asked to imagine Otto, a person with severe memory deficiencies who writes down everything he is not able to remember in his notebook and uses that notebook on an everyday basis as a kind of external memory tool. Thus, for instance, Otto does not remember where a certain museum is located but he knows that this information is written down in his notebook and looks for it every time he needs it. According to Clark and Chalmers, Otto has a *belief* about the museum's location even before he searches for this information in his notebook. This conclusion may seem to run counter the intuition on the standard usage of the concept of belief. Nevertheless, it poses no worry to the authors:

> We do not intend to debate what is standard usage [of the term 'belief']; our broader point is that the notion of belief ought to be used so that Otto qualifies as having the belief in question. [...] By using the 'belief' notion in a wider way, it picks out something more akin to a natural kind. The notion becomes deeper and more unified, and is more useful in explanation.[28]

Clark and Chalmers are thus ready to bite the bullet of the counterintuitiveness of their claim in compensation for the theoretical virtues their understanding of 'belief' offers.

It is not, however, always the case that philosophers explicitly state by virtue of what the concept should be used in one way rather than the other. In this respect, it seems, conceptual analysis can benefit hugely from looking at some of the

---

[25] S.M. Nicoli, *The Role of Intuitions in Philosophical Methodology*, London 2016, p. 102.

[26] Ibidem, p. 99.

[27] As a matter of fact, Nicoli's attack on experimental philosophy has a bunch of other motivations as well. See especially Chapter 8 "Against Experimental Philosophy" (pp. 129–157).

[28] A. Clark, D. Chalmers, "The Extended Mind," *Analysis* 58 [1] (1998), p. 14.

experimental philosophy's studies. Consider, for instance, one of its most famous findings known as the 'Knobe effect.' In his 2003 study Joshua Knobe empirically tested the application of the concept of intentionality among laypeople using vignettes in which two hypothetical cases were presented. The first one reads:

> The vice-president of a company went to the chairman of the board and said, 'We are thinking of starting a new program. It will help us increase profits, but it will also harm the environment.'
>
> The chairman of the board answered, 'I don't care at all about harming the environment. I just want to make as much profit as I can. Let's start the new program.'
>
> They started the new program. Sure enough, the environment was harmed.[29]

The second scenario was almost identical with only one important exception: the verb 'harm' was replaced by 'help' so instead of harming the environment the new program was about to help it. What did not change was the attitude of the chairman: as in the first case he did not care about the effect the program will have on the environment but only about the possible profits. Strikingly, this neglected side-effect of the program was a huge factor for the people's ascriptions of the chairman's intention: the vast majority of participants in the study judged the chairman to be harming the environment intentionally while in the second case the results were drastically reversed—the chairman was considered to *not* intentionally helping the environment.[30]

The explanation of this disparity in answers, however interesting in itself, is not at issue here. With regard to the role of conceptual analysis and thought experiments there is, nevertheless, a significant moral here. Philosopher who claims that the role of the intuitive judgement is to provide a norm of a concept application, as Nicoli does, should be worried about the apparent inconsistency of laypeople's intuitions. For if the outcome of the action does matter for ascribing intention, then chairman in the help-condition scenario should also be judged to act intentionally. On the other hand, if the outcome is not an important factor, then the chairman in the harm-condition should be considered as acting unintentionally. If the role of intuition is to convey a norm of concept application, then clearly one of those two intuitions is wrong.

Of course, the obvious way to respond is to maintain that a philosopher is well-equipped with the relevant tools and therefore is able to argue which of the concept application is the correct one (and why). But even so, this is precisely why conceptual analysis can benefit greatly from looking at the empirical findings. The concept of intentionality is a perfectly ordinary one and hence its meaning is arguably carved out of its usage. Then again, analysing such a concept only from the armchair perspective can easily lead to omitting a compelling aspect of its actual usage. The role of philosopher is then not only to provide a given norm alone, but to clarify the concept so that the troublesome pattern of its everyday application is explained away. I will come back to this point in the next section where those considerations will be moved to the ethical ground.

---

[29] J. Knobe, "Intentional Action and Side Effects in Ordinary Language," *Analysis* 63 [3] (2003), p. 191.

[30] Ibidem.

4. Conceptual analysis and ethics

This section is going to address the aforementioned issues on the grounds of ethics. In particular, I am going to show how the model sketched in the first three sections can be successfully applied in ethics. Since there are to my mind at least two ways of doing so, this paragraphs will be divided accordingly. The first part deals with the question of how ethics can benefit from conceptual analysis understood as a tool for clarifying concepts. In the second part, I am going to argue that at least some thought experiments can be understood as eliciting intuitions about ethical *concepts* rather than the entities in the world.

It is worth noticing that in recent years the conceptual issues within the ethical inquiry have been brought into attention due to the spectacular popularity of the so-called conceptual engineering or conceptual ethics. Roughly speaking, the idea is that certain concepts may be somehow (epistemically, functionally, morally...) defective and thus the role of a philosopher is to ameliorate, re-engineer, eliminate or replace them. This concerns ethical concepts as well. In fact, as paradigmatic examples of normative concepts, they are of special interest to the investigation concerning which normative concepts should be used in theorizing—investigation usually labelled as conceptual ethics.[31] Nevertheless, in the remaining of the paper I will not explicitly make any reference to the research program of that kind as I am interested not in the *prescriptive* investigations of conceptual *engineering* but rather in the role of conceptual *analysis*, as depicted in the first three sections.

4.1. Clarification role of conceptual analysis

The general role of conceptual analysis is to clarify concepts. That fact alone provides a sufficient reason to believe this method is helpful for ethics. For no matter what exact metaethical position one takes, there is no other way to deal with ethical properties than by using associated concepts that express them. But clarification role of analysis in ethics does not, strictly speaking, concern only inherently ethical concepts.

One of the main arguments against ethical realism is the so-called argument from disagreement. In a nutshell, the argument calls into question the objectivity of moral principles and rules in virtue of the prevalence of ethical disagreement of various kinds: cross-cultural, among the members of one society, among different generations[32] or between normative ethical theories formulated by distinguished philosophers.[33] The popular realists' answer maintains that such forms of disagree-

---

[31] Literature on conceptual engineering is enormous. As to conceptual ethics in the ethical enquiry as just sketched see e.g. A. Burgess, D. Plunkett, "Conceptual Ethics I," *Philosophy Compass* 8 [12] (2013), pp. 1091–1101; A. Burgess, "Conceptual Ethics II," *Philosophy Compass* 8 [12] (2013), pp. 1102–1110; M. Eklund, *Choosing Normative Concepts*, Oxford 2017; T. McPherson, D. Plunkett, "Conceptual Ethics and the Methodology of Normative Inquiry," [in:] *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*, A. Burgess, H. Cappelen, D. Plunkett (eds.), Oxford 2020, pp. 274–303.

[32] J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong,* London 1977, p. 36.

[33] J.P. Burgess, "Against Ethics," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10 [5] (2007), p. 436.

ment are superficial and in fact lie in the disagreement on non-moral beliefs.[34] Now, if that is true then certainly conceptual analysis may serve the aim of reducing *prima facie* ethical disagreement by clarifying all the relevant non-moral concepts. For if an ethical disagreement in fact comes down to the factual disagreement, one of the possible explanations of why people disagree is that they talk past each other because of, for instance, using concepts equivocally. Once conceptual analysis helps to determine how a given concept should be used, it can yield the settlement on the actual ethical contention.

The same goes for the disagreement on the concept application. Consider again the example of the Knobe effect evoked in the last section. Suppose there is a disagreement between two people on whether or not the chairman did *wrong* and is *blameworthy*. This is an instance of a perfectly ordinary ethical disagreement. However, it can be easily rooted in the non-moral disagreement, e.g. as to whether or not the chairman acted intentionally. If that is so, then the settlement on what is the norm of the application of the concept of an intentional act will effect in reaching an agreement on the moral judgement. Yet again, it is the empirical finding that enhances the conceptual analysis and allow locating the disagreement in the chain of reasoning.

Such a conceptual analysis improved by the empirical backup seems to be vital in yet another class of concepts. While some concepts are clearly normative and some others clearly factual (or descriptive), there are some that are vague—depending on context, they can be treated either as normative or as factual. We may call them two-faced concepts.[35] In case of a moral judgement containing such a two-faced concept the risk of using the concept equivocally runs dangerously high. What is even more bothering, equivocal utterance is usually opaque for the speaker since it is the result of a conceptual confusion. For instance, the concept *normal* is two-faced since depending on the context what one has in mind saying 'X is normal' may refer to either the statistical prevalence of X, as in "being right-handed is normal" (descriptive usage) or to the condemnation/acclamation of a particular behaviour, as in "being paedophile is not normal" (normative usage). Equivocal usage of that two-faced concept threatens, however, of (unconsciously) jumping from the descriptive premise to the normative conclusion. As before, to understand where the confusion comes from and how it works exactly, one needs to look at the actual empirical findings.

4.2. Thought experiments in ethics

The metaphilosophical picture according to which the central role of thought experiments in philosophy is to elicit certain intuitions about given concept application is somewhat commonly shared in contemporary philosophy.[36] Nevertheless,

---

[34] E.g. M. Huemer, *Ethical Intuitionism*, New York 2005, p. 130.

[35] In a similar vein Kevin Reuter calls such them 'dual character concepts,' giving examples of such concepts as *art*, *friendship*, *happiness*; see K. Reuter, "Dual Character Concepts," *Philosophy Compass* 14 [1] (2019).

[36] Albeit see footnote 17.

philosophers usually make room for (at least) one exception: thought experiments in ethics are not about concepts but rather they target moral properties, ethical principles or rules. I am not going to argue that the entire function of thought experiment in ethics is to yield a claim about concept; however, conceptual investigation is an important concern of such thought experiments.

Some initial remarks on that issue are in order. In some minimal sense, every kind of ethical investigation (including the one that proceeds through the examination of possible cases) is conceptual in nature. As it was stated numerously in this paper, there is no other way of expressing beliefs or propositions than through concepts. However, one might defend a stronger sense of that commitment. It seems possible to argue for a certain version of metaethical anti-realism according to which all that ethics deals with are concepts. There is no non-conceptual ethical realm, nothing that is "out" of the concepts. According to that view every moral property can be ultimately reduced to concepts simply because there is no ethical reality that is mind-independent. This kind of metaethical anti-realism is not, however, the one that I would subscribe to or argue for.

My position would rather go in pair with the view, according to which thought experiments in ethics serve for a different, mutually connected purposes that "[allow] for many different kind of conclusions: they can be about a concept, a proposition, a theory, or about a relation between two or more such objects."[37] The extent to which a given ethical thought experiment is about a concept may vary. Some normative concepts seem to be much more apt in that respect. Arguably, the more disagreement there is on 'what is X' (where X stands for an ethical entity), the more reason we have to suspect that the disagreement is (at least partially) rooted in the concept application. One of the examples might be 'justice.' In a common situation of a dispute on whether certain act is just, the contention may rest upon what one thinks justice to consist of, in other words—what is one's concept of justice.

Thus in the familiar thought experiment from *The Republic* the output can be interpreted as being about the concept. For it is demonstrable that the role of this thought experiment is to rebut the proposed definition of justice by showing an example in which such definition does not apply. Therefore, to understand what is the correct concept of justice one needs to look for a different definition (qua analysis). If the model proposed by Nicoli is at least remotely correct, then the intuitive judgement on that Plato's thought experiment is to be read that 'the concept of justice should not be applied in such-and-such circumstances.'

What about thought experiments that are less openly about concept applications? It is very often the case that a thought experiment appeals to some tacit assumptions one needs to accept in order to agree with the argument's conclusion. To illustrate this, it is worth considering one of the most famous 20th century ethical thought experiments constructed by Judith Jarvis Thomson, commonly known as the Violinist Case. In her paper Thomson argues for a moral permissibility of abortion and asks to consider the following scenario:

---

[37] G. Brun, "Thought Experiments in Ethics," [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Thought Experiments*, M.T. Stuart, Y. Fehige, J.R. Brown, London–New York, p. 198.

> You wake up in the morning and find yourself back to back in bed with an unconscious violinist. A famous unconscious violinist. He has been found to have a fatal kidney ailment, and the Society of Music has canvassed all the available medical records and found that you alone have the right blood type to help. They have therefore kidnapped you, and last night the violinist's circulatory system was plugged into yours, so that your kidneys can be used to extract poisons from his blood as well as your own. The director of the hospital now tells you, "Look, we're sorry the Society of Music Lovers did this to you—we would never have permitted it if we had known. But still, they did it, and the violinist now is plugged into you. To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you." Is it morally incumbent on you to accede to this situation? No doubt it would be very nice of you if you did, a great kindness. But do you have to accede to it?[38]

On the surface, what Thomson is explicitly asking about is the moral obligation one has when put in such a position (or lack thereof). However, the actual Thomson's purpose reaches far deeper. As Georg Brun observes, this thought experiment "can be also reconstructed as challenging the tacit assumption that the right to life entails a right to be sustained in living."[39] If that is so, then this kind of challenge is aimed precisely at the concepts. After all, the mastery of conceptual competence consist, among others, of being able to point to what are the concept's connections (such as entailment) to other concepts.[40]

This is the case of a great deal of thought experiments in ethics. The role of conceptual analysis would be, thus, to look for and bring out such tacit assumptions. This move might serve two purposes. Firstly, it clarifies what exactly given thought experiment asks about and therefore helps to appropriately respond to it. Secondly, it provides us with a tool to explain all the non-moral discrepancies away resulting in a better understanding of what is really going on when two people disagree on an ethical case.

Conclusion

Conceptual analysis that makes use of thought experiments has an esteemed and well-established position in many fields of philosophy, including epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind or philosophy of language. And although the same might be said about the role of thought experiments in ethics, the reputation of conceptual analysis in this branch is surprisingly low.

As I tried to show, however, conceptual analysis can play a profound role in ethics, especially when combined with a dash of empirical support. After all, one of the goals of any ethical enterprises is a better understanding of others. People communicate in a language and language in turn expresses concepts, therefore any way of a better understanding of concepts entails a better understanding of one another.

The model I have tried to present should be understood as a sketchy one. In particular, wherever possible I have deliberately stayed neutral on the particular

---

[38] J.J. Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 [1] (1971), pp. 48–49.
[39] G. Brun, "Thought Experiments in Ethics," p. 199.
[40] Cf. K. Ludwig, "The Epistemology of Thought Experiments...," p. 130.

accounts of the entities of a philosophical interest. Therefore I have not determined what is the nature of a thought experiment, intuition, concept or which particular metaethical theory I subscribe to. The hope beyond that was to present an invitation to consider the role of conceptual analysis in somehow fresh light, but if that approach is at any rate promising, then all of those things will have to be developed.

Bibliography

Brendel E., "Intuition Pumps and the Proper Use of Thought Experiment," *Dialectica* 58 [1] (2004), pp. 89–108.

Brown J.R., *The Laboratory of the Mind: Thought Experiments in the Natural Sciences,* London–New York 1991.

Brun G., "Thought Experiments in Ethics," [in:] *The Routledge Companion to Thought Experiments*, M.T. Stuart, Y. Fehige, J.R. Brown (eds.), London–New York 2018, pp. 195–210.

Buckwalter W., Stich S., "Gender and Philosophical Intuition," [in:] *Experimental Philosophy*, vol. 2, J. Knobe, S. Nichols (eds.), New York 2014.

Burgess A., Plunkett D., "Conceptual Ethics I," *Philosophy Compass* 8 [12] (2013), pp. 1091–1101.

Burgess A., Plunkett D., "Conceptual Ethics II," *Philosophy Compass* 8 [12] (2013), pp. 1102–1110.

Burgess J.P., "Against Ethics," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10 [5] (2007), pp. 427–439.

Cappelen H., *Philosophy without Intuitions*, New York 2012.

Clark A., Chalmers D., "The Extended Mind," *Analysis* 58 [1] (1998), pp. 10–23.

Dennett D., *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*, New York–London 2013.

Dennett D., "The Milk of Human Intentionality," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3 [3] (1980), pp. 428–430.

Deutsch M., *The Myth of the Intuitive: Experimental Philosophy and Philosophical Method*, Cambridge 2015.

Eklund M., *Choosing Normative Concepts*, Oxford 2017.

Gendler T.S., *Thought Experiment: On the Power and Limits of Imaginary Cases*, New York 2000.

Glock H.-J., "A Cognitivist Approach to Concepts," *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 82 (2011), pp. 131–163.

Häggqvist S., "A Model for Thought Experiments," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 39 [1] (2009), pp. 55–76.

Hales S.D., *Relativism and the Foundations of Philosophy*, Cambridge 2006.

Huemer M., *Ethical Intuitionism,* New York 2005.

Kauppinen A., "The Rise and Fall of Experimental Philosophy," *Philosophical Explorations* 10 [2] (2007), pp. 95–118.

Knobe J., "Intentional Action and Side Effects in Ordinary Language," *Analysis* 63 [3] (2003), pp. 190–194.

Knobe J., Nichols S., "An Experimental Philosophy Manifesto," [in:] *Experimental Philosophy*, J. Knobe, S. Nichols (eds.), New York 2008.

Laskowski N., Finlay S., "Conceptual Analysis in Metaethics," [in:] *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics*, T. McPherson, D. Plunkett (eds.), New York–London 2018.

Lowe E.J., "Grasp of Essences versus Intuitions: An Unequal Contest," [in:] *Intuition*, A.R. Booth, D.P. Rowbottom (eds.), Oxford 2014.

Ludwig K., "The Epistemology of Thought Experiments: First Person versus Third Person Approaches," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 31 (2007), pp. 128–159.

Machery E., Mallon R., Nichols S., Stich S., "Semantics Cross-Cultural Style," *Cognition* 92 [3] (2004), pp. B1–B12.

Mackie J.L., *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, London 1977.

McPherson T., Plunkett D., "Conceptual Ethics and the Methodology of Normative Inquiry," [in:] *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*, A. Burgess, H. Cappelen, D. Plunkett (eds.), Oxford 2020, pp. 274–303.

Moore G.E., "A Reply to My Critics," [in:] *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore*, P.A. Schilpp (ed.), New York 1942, pp. 534–677.

Nicoli S.M., *The Role of Intuitions in Philosophical Methodology*, London 2016.

Norton J.D., "Are Thought Experiments Just What You Thought," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26 [3] (1996), pp. 333–366.

Plato, *The Republic,* transl. B. Jowett, 1901. Web edition at: http://studymore.org.uk/xpla0.htm.

Rescher N., "Thought Experimentation in Presocratic Philosophy," [in:] *Thought Experiments in Science and Philosophy*, T. Horowitz, G.J. Massey (eds.), New York–London 1991, pp. 31–41.

Reuter K., "Dual Character Concepts," *Philosophy Compass* 14 [1] (2019), https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12557.

The Routledge Companion to Thought Experiments, M.T. Stuart, Y. Fehige, J.R. Brown (eds.), New York–London 2017.

Sandis C., "The Experimental Turn and Ordinary Language," *Essays in Philosophy* 11 [2] (2010), pp. 181–196.

Shinod N.K., "Why Thought Experiments Do Have a Life of Their Own: Defending the Autonomy of Thought Experimentation Method," *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 34 [1] (2017), pp. 75–98.

Sorensen R., *Thought Experiments*, Oxford 1992.

Stich S., Tobia K., "Experimental Philosophy and the Philosophical Tradition," [in:] *A Companion to Experimental Philosophy*, J. Sytsma, W. Buckwalter (eds.), Hoboken 2016, pp. 3–21.

Thomson J.J., "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 [1] (1971), pp. 47–66.

Weinberg J.M., Nichols S., Stich S., "Normativity and Epistemic Intuition," *Philosophical Topics* 29 [1–2] (2001), pp. 429–460.

Wittgenstein L., *Philosophical Investigations*, revised 4th edition, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, J. Schulte, Oxford 1953/2009.