

'CONCEPTUAL TURN' IN RECENT PHILOSOPHY

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Contemporary philosophy has taken a 'conceptual turn' in recent years. This turn, however, unlike previous turns (*i.e.* the 'linguistic turn', the 'existential turn', etc.) is not the handiwork of any "school". Indeed, its practitioners are scattered wide and, in some instances, remain detached from each other. Yet, it would be accurate to say that the philosophers who have taken the 'conceptual turn' do share, in a nontrivial sense, a characteristic approach to philosophic problems.

In this article I will reconstruct the rationale and meaning of the 'conceptual turn'. Others who have taken the turn (as I have) may take exception to some point or other in my reconstruction; and some may present their own reconstructions. I do not wish to be the spokesman for a nonexistent "school". I only present the pattern as I see it.

Briefly, then, I will sketch: (1) the emerging paradigm of philosophy as a 'metascience' (*versus* 'metagrammar'), (2) the redefinition of the character of 'philosophic propositions' (*versus* nonphilosophic propositions); and (3) the ontological assumptions requisite for taking the 'conceptual turn'.

The *materia philosophica*, included in the "Sample Bibliography" appended to this article, are to be taken only as illustrative. They constitute but fragmentary evidence for the 'conceptual turn' in recent philosophy. Yet they display, explicitly or implicitly, the character and the direction of the turn.

I. Paradigm of Philosophy as ‘Metascience’ versus ‘Metagrammar’

“Die Philosophie ist keine der Naturwissenschaften (Das Wort ‘Philosophie’ muss etwas bedeuten, was über oder unter, aber nicht neben den Naturwissenschaften steht)”, wrote Wittgenstein (*Tractatus*: prop. 4.111). No modern philosopher would disagree with this statement. But the moment anyone attempts to fix the function of philosophy precisely, whether “above” or “below” the arts and sciences, difficulties arise and disagreements issue.

Consider two alternatives:

- (1) Paradigm of philosophy as a ‘metagrammar’. It (reduced to its essence) asserts: The object of philosophic inquiry is the clarification of the meanings of expressions, and their appropriate/inappropriate usage, by means of the ordinary language. Call this the MG paradigm.
- (2) Paradigm of philosophy as a ‘metascience’. It (reduced to its essence) asserts: The object of philosophic inquiry is the clarification of the meanings of concepts and their logical/dialectical interrelations by means of the ideal language. Call this the MS paradigm.

The key terms are (in MG) ‘usage’ and ‘ordinary language’; and (in MS) ‘concepts’ and ‘ideal language’. That defines the difference between them. To adopt MG entails taking the ‘linguistic turn’; to adopt MS entails taking the ‘conceptual turn’.

The challenge of MG (already familiar) is to insist that, behind nearly all philosophic puzzles, lie grammatical misunderstandings of one kind or another, and that, when these misunderstandings are exposed, the puzzles dissolve. Accordingly MG philosophers are preoccupied with the “snares of language”, wherein lies the source of all our philosophic malaise, and wherein all philosophic remedies are to be sought. Thus, e.g., they would say that Kant’s ‘antinomies of pure

reason' were generated by grammatical misunderstandings; and that Kant, despite his demonstrably keen analytical powers, was oblivious to these simplistic errors. But anyone who understands anything about the dialectic of the conceptual problems which Kant handled, and toward the solution of which he contributed, would find such an explanation unpalatable, to say the least. Kantian analyses did result in important conceptual distinctions.

MS, accordingly, would challenge MG as follows: (a) that no genuine conceptual problem can be dissolved by changing our ways of talking about them (and to think otherwise is to entertain a 'philosophic illusion'); and (b) that of any philosophic analysis it may be said, either that it results in conceptual elucidation, or that it results in no conceptual elucidation; in the one case it is significant, in the other it is trivial. Therefore, 'conceptual analysis', and not 'linguistic analysis', constitutes the proper function of philosophy.

The contrast between the two paradigms could not be starker.

Yet, the two paradigms are not wholly unrelated. MG (as will be seen) rests upon a mistake. To overcome the mistake, one must take a 'critical step', from language to metalanguage. Then one sees that the elucidation of 'logical form' becomes accessible. Taking this 'critical step' directly leads to the basic assumption of MS. That is the dialectical relation between the two paradigms.

The question, then, is: Was the 'linguistic turn' really based upon a mistake?

The mistake underlying the MG paradigm was *occasioned* by a mistake occurring in the *Tractatus*. In the context of the *Tractatus* the mistake was understandable. But in the context of the 'linguistic turn' it acquired an hyperbolic exaggeration.

Consider the pair of propositions in the *Tratatus*:

P₁: "Philosophy aims at the clarification of thoughts"
(4.112a).

and

P₂: “Philosophy does not result in ‘philosophic propositions’ ” (4.112d).

Logically speaking, P₁ does *not* imply P₂; for it is not contradictory to assert P₁ while negating P₂. One may argue, on the contrary, that the negation of P₂ is implied by P₁, on the condition of introducing the *following assumption*:

P₃: The logical form of thought (language) can be described by a metalanguage.

This is the ‘critical step’.

P₃ introduces the language/metalanguage distinction; and thereby rejects the thesis that the ‘logical form’ of thought can be *shown* but not *described*.

From the conjunction of P₁ and P₃ we obtain:

P₄: Philosophy *results* in ‘philosophic propositions’.

And from the conjunction of P₃ and P₄ we obtain:

P₅: Philosophic propositions *describe* the ‘logical form’ of thoughts.

The assumption of P₃ (our ‘critical step’) is now a commonplace. Wittgenstein (as everyone knows) *did not* hold this assumption; but (as not everyone knows) he *could not* hold this assumption. The explanation, in retrospect, is clear: Wittgenstein, the builder of the picture theory of *language*, did not envision the possibility of a *metalanguage*. Hence, in the context of his logical atomism, all propositions were of equal value (*gleichwertig*). But, we know, he actually *used* what he did not formally *admit*. Thus, firstly, he posited a ‘logical space’; and, secondly, he made a working distinction, to say the least, between the ‘senseless’ (*sinnlos*) and the ‘nonsensical’ (*unsinning*). So he was able to make room for

logico-philosophic propositions within his system. Yet, in the end, he refused to assign these propositions any denotative function. That was his mistake. This inconsistency between Wittgenstein's *theory* and his *practice* of philosophy persisted –until it ended in the inevitable repudiation of Wittgenstein I by Wittgenstein II. For (we must agree with Bergmann) the *Untersuchungen* was only “the reaction, dictated by the counsel of despair, to the failure” of the *Tractatus*.

From the mistake of the master to the mistake to be made by his epigones was but a single step: Since (a) ‘philosophic propositions’ lacked a denotative function, (b) they could not say anything about the world, and therefore (c) they were vacuous. That is the implicit argument behind the MG paradigm. Its conclusion (c) follows from its premises; but the premise (a) is questionable. If one accepts P_5 , then one must reject (a). But one cannot accept P_5 without taking the ‘critical step’ (P_3), *i.e.*, without assuming the language/metalanguage distinction. The MG philosophers, failing to take the language/metalanguage distinction seriously, failed to take the ‘critical step’. That was their mistake. They consequently never arrived at P_5 . They did not see that ‘philosophic propositions’ *may* say something about the logical form of thought and, consequently, the logical form of the world (insofar as the latter is intelligible *within* our conceptual schemata). So they remained mired in arbitrary grammarizing about the appropriate/inappropriate usage of expressions in ordinary language.

The consequence of the mistake was a paradox (already evident in the last pages of the *Tractatus* and, subsequently, in the discourses of the Oxford philosophers): That the philosophic propositions asserted by these philosophers, including propositions concerning the meaning of ‘philosophic propositions’, were themselves meaningless if true, and meaningful only if false. Wittgenstein himself saw the point: “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: Anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical [sic], when he has used them –as steps– to climb up beyond them.” (6.54) But his advice to the readers of the *Tractatus*,

i.e. to throw the ladder away after having climbed up on it, could hardly apply to the readers of the *Untersuchungen* (*i.e.* the MG philosophers at Oxford and elsewhere), who remained without any “logical scaffolding” and certainly without a “ladder”.

The MS paradigm accepts P_5 . It can answer the dilemma —philosophy must be either science or nothing— therefore: Philosophy is, neither science nor nothing, but a ‘metascience’.

II. Toward a Redefinition of ‘Philosophy’ and ‘Philosophic Propositions’

1. *Definition*

Philosophy is the metascience of invariant concepts and basic paradigms. Its *method* of inquiry consists of the elucidation of concepts and the logical/dialectical construction of paradigms.

Its *results* are:

- (a) philosophic propositions concerning the meanings of concepts and their logical/dialectical interrelations;
- b) philosophic paradigms concerning general patterns which interrelate aspects of art, science, and life.

2. *Explication*

‘Metascience’ means: Inquiry into the realm of basic concepts and problems which are *presupposed* and/or *implied* by the special arts and sciences, but which lie *beyond the range* of their limited methodologies. Only the logical/dialectical methodology of ‘modern philosophy’ can handle these metascientific concepts and problems. ‘Metascience’ (not “metaphysics”!) is ontologically *neutral*: It is not handicapped by dualistic prejudices or anti-scientific tendencies.

‘Invariant concepts’ are those basic concepts which recur in the discourses of the various arts and sciences, and whose meanings are presupposed throughout these diverse contexts. Examples of ‘invariant concepts’ are: ‘truth’, ‘meaning’,

'value', 'causality', 'form', 'system', 'actuality', 'potentiality', 'possibility', 'harmony', a.o. These invariant concepts (and their constancies of meanings) constitute the exclusive objects of philosophic inquiry.

Philosophic paradigms depict relations between systems of relations. They are constructed logically/dialectically out of the analogies of experience and/or reflection. Examples of 'philosophic paradigms' are: epistemic models, cosmic models, and ethical models.

3. *Philosophic propositions*

The special character of philosophic propositions, which distinguishes them from every form of nonphilosophic propositions, consists in this: That they depict the *logical form* of concepts and/or relations between concepts.

Thus 'philosophic propositions' are, neither *factual statements* (i.e. propositions about particular events in the world), nor *linguistic statements* (i.e. propositions about the appropriate/inappropriate usage of expressions in ordinary language), but rather *logical statements*.

Philosophic propositions elucidate the logical form of thought (about the world): Therefore they provide *a priori* knowledge.

A priori propositions derive their truth, directly or indirectly, from the meanings of their concepts in the context of the 'ideal language'.

There are two kinds of *a priori* propositions:

- (AA) *analytic a priori* propositions which involve concepts representing the *contents of knowledge*; e.g. 'At least two points lie on any given line';
- (SA) *synthetic a priori* propositions which involve concepts representing the *conditions of knowledge*; e.g. 'Every phenomenon has a cause.'

The difference between these two kinds of propositions lies in that they occur at different *epistemic levels*. *AA*

occurs at the level of the *conditioned*, while *SA* occurs at the level of the *precondition*: *AA* describes the structure of concepts; *SA*, the logical conditions for the intelligibility of our knowledge about any structure whatever. Hence the derivation of *AA* is relatively direct, while that of *SA* is rather indirect (as it involves transcendental deduction). Thus, e.g., the causal principle (stated above) is to be derived, not directly from the meanings of *its* concepts, but indirectly, by their reduction to the ground-concepts of 'being' and 'becoming', and only then it becomes analytically evident that the assertion of the proposition 'Being becomes from non-being' (which entails the negation of the causality principle) is self-contradictory. Thus, while *AA* usually results in *definitions*, *SA* results in *reductions*. Both kinds of propositions add to our knowledge of the form of the 'intelligible world'. Our main assumption here being, that the world of logical forms is a 'possible world', an assumption which will be exposed in the last section of this article.

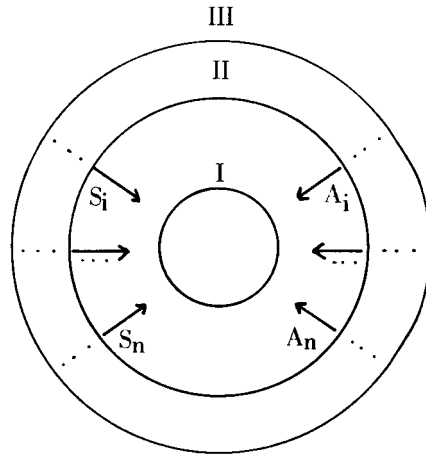
III. Relations of Philosophy to the Arts and Sciences

Philosophy is the scaffolding of the arts and sciences. That is the main thesis. Its meaning may be elucidated by focussing on the twofold relations which hold between philosophy and the arts and sciences:

- (1) Philosophy articulates the *epistemological presuppositions* (i.e. invariant concepts and assumptions) of the arts and sciences.
- (2) Philosophy reconstructs the *cosmological implications* (i.e. philosophic paradigms) of the arts and sciences.

Thus philosophy examines, at two different levels, the relations between systems of relations.

- III. 'Modern Philosophy':
General Order
- II. Arts & Sciences:
Special Orders
- I. Reality:
Unknown Order



(Paradigm of Three Concentric Circles)

Three concentric circles depict the relation of philosophy to the arts and sciences and to reality. As the picturing of reality by the arts and sciences progresses, the innermost circle approaches the midcircle. But the midcircle, regardless of the extent of its expansion, will never coincide with the outer circle. Metascientific problems remain beyond the reach of scientific methodology. Only the logical/dialectical methodology of 'modern philosophy' can handle these problems. Thus the roles of the arts and sciences and the role of philosophy, vis-à-vis reality, are complementary.

IV. Ontological Assumptions of the 'Conceptual Turn'

Professor Bergmann once remarked: "The 'latent content' of many recent and current discussions is ontological; their 'manifest content' is something else." I agree. Let us, therefore, lay out the "latent content" of the 'conceptual turn' alongside its "manifest content". But let there be no misunderstanding:

Exhibiting one's assumptions is not demonstrating them. The latter would be a task for another essay.

The ontological assumptions of the 'conceptual turn' are clustered around one word: 'Realism'.

Specifically: One must assume, in taking the 'conceptual turn', the reality of 'logical space' and the possibility of the construction/reconstruction of concepts and propositions therein. This is the philosophic core of 'realism'; its circumference is another matter. Phenomenology operates on the circumference of reality.

I use the word 'realism', philosophically, in three senses:

Realism₁ states that 'mental acts' exist, or, have ontological status.

Realism₂ states that the 'external world' exists independently of our awareness of it.

Realism₃ assigns denotative function to the symbolic expressions of scientific/philosophic language.

The logical issue underlying these senses of 'realism' concerns the meaning of the expression 'exists'.

I define:

To 'exist' is to be the referent of a symbol in the ideal language.

Symbolically:

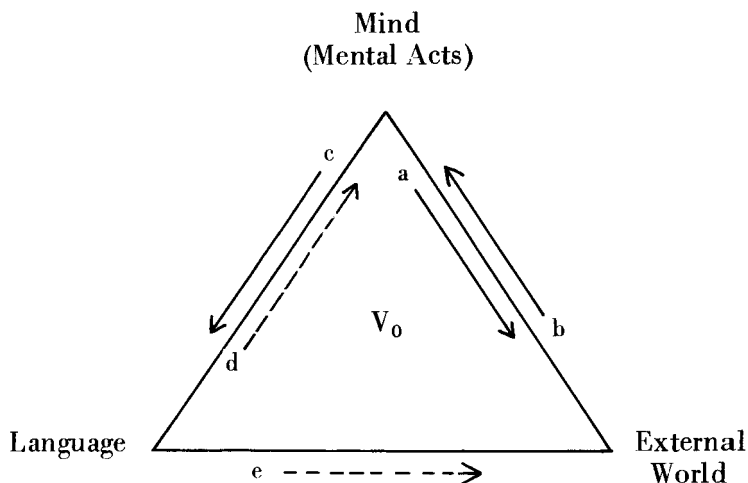
$$E(x) = \text{df } (\exists a) [(a : x) \wedge (a \in L)]$$

Such a definition of 'existence' avoids the usual circularity. It retains the distinction between the 'existential predicate' (E) and the 'existential quantifier' (\exists). The former refers to 'existence', as a higher level concept; and the latter to 'existents', as a lower level concept. Or (to use a Kantian expression) one says that 'existence' is not a predicate of

objects. The question, what is 'existence' (isness), is a philosophical issue; but the question, what are 'existents' (or kinds of existents), is a scientific issue. (This demonstrates, incidentally, that the Quinean question, concerning "what there is", in terms of which he defines the task of ontology, is either ambiguous or, if clear, a very nonphilosophical question.)

Being a realist in the sense of Realism₁ does not entail being a realist in the sense of Realism₂, and conversely. But being a realist in the sense of either Realism₁ or Realism₂ entails being a realist in the sense of Realism₃. This, then, is the common bond between these two forms of realism against nominalism. Some are realists of one kind (blending Realism₁ and Realism₃) or of another (blending Realism₂ and Realism₃). They are, strictly speaking, quasi-realists. Others (those, including this writer, who have taken the 'conceptual turn') are complex-realists. They are realists in all three senses of the term. One can hardly take the 'conceptual turn', without embracing, eventually, a complex ontological realism.

The ontological assumptions of the 'conceptual turn' (as I reconstruct it) may be illustrated by the following schema:

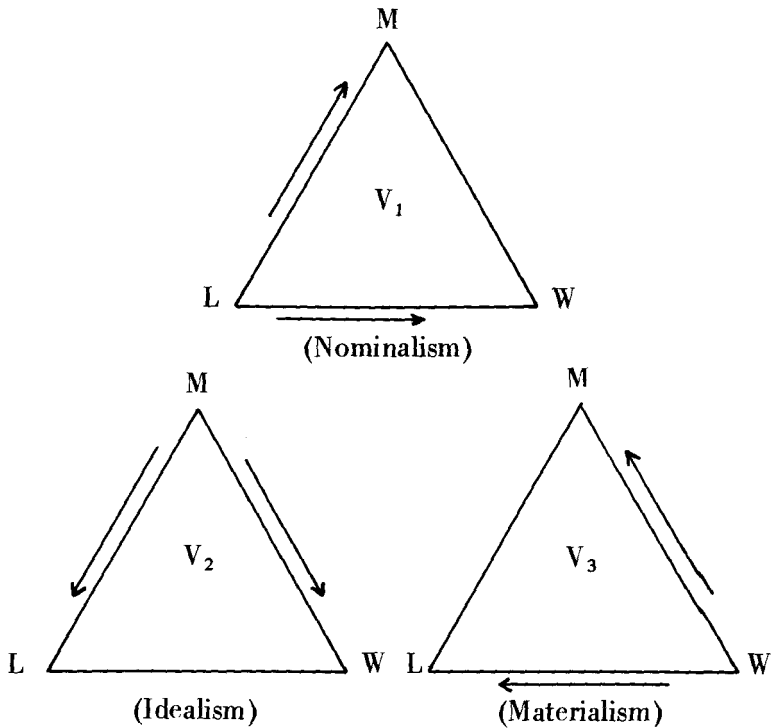


Let this 'Epistemological Triangle' (V_0) serve as a model for a complex/critical realism – where:

- a = categorial matrix of possible experience
- b = empirical contents of actual experience
- c = symbolic expression of concepts/propositions
- d = mental denotata
- e = material denotata

* 'picture theory' of language (of the kind contributed by Wittgenstein) is assumed.

Compare three quasi-realistic variations of the 'Epistemological Triangle': (The letters W, M, and L stand for World, Mind, and Language, respectively)



Symbolically:

$$\begin{array}{lll} \forall x (x \in V_1) & \forall x (x \in V_2) & \forall x (x \in V_3) \\ \equiv (x \in L \vee L \rightarrow x) & \equiv (x \in M \vee M \rightarrow x) & \equiv (x \in W \vee W \rightarrow x) \end{array}$$

Three eclipsed worlds — V_1, V_2, V_3 — representing nevertheless three ‘possible worlds’. Skepticism rejects them each on dialectical grounds alone. Critical realism overcomes them by radically reconstructing them —as shown by V_0 above— and the validity of the reconstruction is to be determined by its range of explanation.

V. A Note on the Methodology of the ‘Conceptual Turn’

The methodological requirements of the ‘conceptual turn’ —i.e., that there are *levels of analysis* (ranging from the ‘exhibition analysis’ at the surface level, to the ‘replacement analysis’ at the mediate level, to the ‘reductive analysis’ at the basic level); or that *analysis* (as the elucidation of concepts) and *synthesis* (as the construction of paradigms) are complementary operations; or that the *ideal language* (namely, the technical language with a capacity for logical precision and ontological neutrality), rather than “ordinary language”, is the proper language of philosophic inquiry— these methodological issues will be handled by this writer in another article.

A SAMPLE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE ‘CONCEPTUAL TURN’

The *materia philosophica* representing the ‘conceptual turn’ are sufficiently extensive to fill an entire issue of this journal. They fall roughly into two groupings: Those works which treat of ground-issues, and those which examine special problems in philosophy, both representing (explicitly or implicitly) the *conceptual approach* to issues. My list is illustrative rather than exhaustive.

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RESUMEN

Tanto el significado como la razón de ser del “cambio conceptual”, evento de reconocida importancia en la filosofía contemporánea, se explican en términos de: (a) el surgimiento de la concepción de la filosofía como una “metaciencia” (*versus* una “metagramática”); (b) la reconstrucción del argumento que está en la base de este “cambio conceptual”; y, finalmente, (c) los presupuestos ontológicos (mostrados por el modelo del “triángulo epistemológico”) necesarios para el cambio. El dilema común en muchos círculos filosóficos de que o bien la filosofía es una ciencia o no es nada, es superado así: la filosofía es la metaciencia de los conceptos y los paradigmas invariantes. Y es sobre esta base que es posible redefinir, *ab novo*, la relación complementaria entre la filosofía moderna y las artes y las ciencias.

[A.C.; Trad. Raymundo Morado]