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Peter Unger

EMPTY IDEAS: A CRITIQUE OF ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

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by

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Metaphysics is back in fashion, at least in the analytic tradition that dominates English-speaking philosophy and is growing rapidly across the rest of the world too. It's quite a turnaround. In the mid-twentieth century, the analytic tradition had two main strands: logical positivism and ordinary language philosophy. The logical positivists dismissed metaphysics as cognitively meaningless, unverifiable by observation and logic. Ordinary language philosophers tended to be equally suspicious, diagnosing metaphysical speculation as the pathological result of using words outside the down-to-earth contexts that gave them meaning. But things have changed. These anti-metaphysical arguments rested on assumptions about meaning that have not withstood the test of time. Moreover, the resurgence of metaphysics was led by philosophers such as Saul Kripke and David Lewis, who wrote so clearly and intelligibly about essential properties (think Aristotle), possible worlds (think Leibniz), and the like that the charge of meaninglessness just would not stick.

Contemporary analytic metaphysicians see themselves as theorizing boldly and systematically about the deepest and most general nature of reality. In Peter Unger's view, they are deluded: far from resuming pre-Kantian metaphysics in the grand old style, they do little more than play with words. Their ideas are mostly *empty*. Indeed, he widens the charge

to analytic philosophy more generally. Nor does he think better of non-analytic philosophy; he just has no time for it.

One might expect that by “empty” Unger means something like “meaningless”. He does not. He allows that some empty ideas are true. For instance, the idea that all red things are coloured is true, not meaningless, but is still empty by Unger’s standard. What he objects to in empty ideas is their lack of *interest*, rather than of meaning or truth. Thus it’s not self-defeating for him to admit, as he does, that some of his own ideas in the book are empty, for analytic philosophers — of whom Unger is one — might have done badly enough to deserve a boring sermon. But Unger does not use “empty” as a synonym for “boring”, otherwise the book would be one long yawn. Instead, emptiness is supposed to be a more objective property of some ideas that explains *why* they should not excite our interest.

To assess Unger’s critique, one must get clear what he does mean by “empty”. He contrasts empty ideas with “substantial” ones. As far as the reader can tell, for an idea to be “substantial” is just for it to be contingent, to concern what could have been otherwise. It’s contingent that Napoleon died on Saint Helena, since he could have died elsewhere, but it’s not contingent whether all red things are coloured. Thus for an idea to be ‘empty’ is just for it to be non-contingent: either necessary or impossible. But, Unger notices, that doesn’t give him what he needs, for all purely mathematical truths are necessary too: $5 + 7$ could not have been 13. If mathematics yields only empty ideas, to say that analytic philosophy yields only empty ideas is at worst to say that it’s as bad as mathematics, which isn’t bad at all. To differentiate philosophy from mathematics, Unger distinguishes between concrete reality (including things in space and time) and abstract reality (including numbers). Supposedly, mathematics succeeds by informing us about abstract reality, whereas analytic philosophy tries but fails to inform us about concrete reality. According to Unger, analytic philosophy yields almost no “concretely substantial ideas”: that is, contingent information about concrete reality.

Unger’s focus on concrete reality doesn’t solve the problem. One reason is that logic and mathematics don’t only inform us about some realm of abstract objects. They are also

useful because they can be applied to concrete reality itself, as in natural science. They give us necessary but far from obvious truths of the form 'If concrete reality satisfies these conditions, then it satisfies this other condition'. Why assume that analytic philosophy isn't doing the same? Yet such truths are "concretely empty" by Unger's standard. Indeed, many ideas of blatant philosophical interest will be "concretely empty". Abbreviate "being that has, of necessity, all these attributes: omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, concreteness, and so existence" as "god". Then the idea that there is a god is non-contingent and so concretely empty, because it's not contingent whether something is necessary. But a philosopher who tells us whether there is a god is doing metaphysics in the grand old style. Indeed, a characteristic ambition of such metaphysics past and present is to understand the deepest, most general, *and necessary* nature of reality. Thus Unger's complaint that analytic metaphysicians give us only concretely empty ideas will not threaten them, since it's in line with their hopes.

Unger's use of the term "empty" is just an advertising trick. It's like a competitor who defines "empty" as "containing nothing but brand X fruit juice" and then puts up posters warning that cartons of brand X fruit juice are empty. To read *Empty Ideas*, one must get through the equivalent of numerous elaborate descriptions of cartons of brand X fruit juice of various types, each concluding that the carton was empty, and for contrast some elaborate descriptions of cartons of brand Y fruit juice of various other types, each concluding that the carton was full. The reader's task is made no easier by Unger's loquacious, attention-seeking prose.

The book does have a way of turning up the heat, by adding a second charge against analytic philosophy: its ideas are not just concretely empty, they are "analytically empty". Unger is more evasive about what he means by "analytically empty" than with "concretely empty". His picture seems to be that the truth or falsity of analytically empty ideas depends on semantic interrelations amongst our words or concepts rather than on features of the reality to which those words or concepts refer. For example, the truth of "All red things are coloured" is supposed to depend on a semantic relation between the word

“red” and the word “coloured”, or a relation between our concept of red and our concept of colour, rather than on a relation between the red things and the coloured things. By contrast, the truth of “Napoleon died on St Helena” is supposed to depend on a relation between the man Napoleon and the island of St Helena, rather than between the name “Napoleon” and the name “St Helena”, or between our concept of Napoleon and our concept of St Helena. So if analytic philosophers’ ideas are analytically empty, they are asking verbal questions, not engaging with the concrete reality whose deepest and most general nature they were hoping to understand.

Unfortunately for Unger, the picture on which his second charge relies has turned out to be much less useful than it may look at first sight. For a start, whether one speaks truly or falsely in uttering any sentence whatsoever depends on the meanings of the words one utters, or on the concepts one uses them to express. Thus “Napoleon died on St Helena” expresses a falsehood when uttered by someone who uses “St Helena” to refer to the town of St Helens in Lancashire, but the other words normally. Moreover, the truth of “All red things are coloured” does turn on a relation between the red things and the coloured things: that the latter include the former. Of course, the meaning of “All red things are coloured” is such that it expresses a necessary truth, while the meaning of “Napoleon died on St Helena” is such that it expresses a contingent one, but that just returns to the original contrast between concretely empty and concretely substantial ideas, and so adds nothing to the first charge. Unger shows no awareness of the difficulty, and says nothing that might help to resolve it.

Some philosophers restrict the term “analytic” to cases where the semantic or conceptual relation at issue should be obvious to a competent user of the language or someone who grasps the relevant concepts. On that reading, the second charge would simply be that analytic philosophers deserve no prizes because what they tell us was obvious anyway, like “All red things are coloured”. But that cannot be what Unger means, for many of the ideas he classifies as analytically empty concern matters that are utterly

unobvious even on reflection, hard or even impossible to decide, and he does not pretend otherwise.

Unger's usual procedure is just to report an analytic philosopher's view and then confidently assert without argument that it is concretely empty, often adding with slightly less confidence and still no argument that it is analytically empty. If he had really uncovered some dark secret about what analytic philosophers are up to, one might have expected the case for the prosecution to take a somewhat more elaborate form.

Occasionally, Unger shares with the reader some of his wild fantasies about mind and matter, as a hint of where the sort of concretely substantial philosophy he favours might go. However, he mostly refrains from claiming that those fantasies are true. According to him, serious progress on that front will require a combination of talent and knowledge in both philosophy and physics to a level that only a handful of favoured individuals currently attain, not including him. The book ends with the injunction that "we philosophers should assume, or maintain, a deeply held attitude of intellectual modesty". The modesty he has in mind seems to be collective, with respect to practitioners of other disciplines, rather than individual, with respect to other philosophers. For he also tells us:

what's already presented in this book, much of it first proposed in my earlier *All the Power in the World*, probably comprises more in the way of novel substantial philosophical ideas than everything published by prominent mainstreamers, all taken together, during the last 70 years or so.

To maintain his modesty with respect to non-philosophers, he adds a disclaimer, perhaps in view of the lack of scientific support for his speculations: "precious little of it—maybe none at all—is worth significant or sustained consideration". If one wanted to refute Unger's claim to (probably) outdo the mainstream in novel substantial philosophical ideas, one could start with a mass of recent work in the philosophy of mind about the contingent workings of the human mind, closely engaged with experimental psychology.

Empty Ideas has several virtues, all characteristic of good analytic philosophy. It is often bold, clear, intelligent, ingenious, and independent-minded. In passing, it makes some

useful contributions to debates in analytic metaphysics, offering examples that repay further reflection, for instance on the topic of essentialism. But it is vitiated by an overall framework that has not been properly constructed and cannot bear the weight of the argument.

There is a genuine question about how learning necessary truths can bring new knowledge, since they exclude no possibilities. But the first step towards answering it is to realize that it is a special case of a more general question: how can learning necessarily equivalent truths bring different knowledge? For instance, knowing the contingent truth “There are 17^2 tiles on the floor” is somehow different from knowing the necessarily equivalent contingent truth “There are 289 tiles on the floor”, just as knowing the trivial necessary truth “ $17^2 = 17^2$ ” is somehow different from knowing the necessarily equivalent but less trivial necessary truth “ $17^2 = 289$ ”. It is still unclear what the best framework is for understanding such matters, but it will surely articulate the way in which our thinking about the same state of affairs can be mediated by different sentences. Whatever the details, there is no good reason to expect the explanation to make a big deal of the difference between disciplines which mainly investigate non-contingent matters, such as mathematics, logic, and philosophy, and most other disciplines, which investigate contingent matters. The large differences in methodology between disciplines have more specific sources. A critique based on confusion about such fundamental issues should not move analytic philosophers.