

# *Saving Armchair Metaphysics from A Posteriori Problems*

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## Introduction

In this paper I will claim that conceptual analysis can plausibly be held to play an essential role in “serious metaphysics” in spite of skeptical arguments concerning our epistemic access to A-intensions. Before arguing for this claim, I will present Frank Jackson’s conception of “serious metaphysics” and show why Jackson thinks that doing conceptual analysis is a necessary part of doing “serious metaphysics”. Furthermore, I will canvass Jackson’s distinction between A-intensions and C-intensions, show the role this distinction plays in Jackson’s account of conceptual analysis and explain why the thesis that we have a priori access to A-intensions is crucial to Jackson’s program. Once this has been covered, I will present an argument against our a priori access to A-intensions and then show that this argument is too strong by providing two thought experiments. Next, I will suggest another argument against our a priori access to A-intensions from the a posteriori nature of our theories. However, I will show that this argument need not pose a problem for Jackson provided that Jackson’s A-intensions consist of the right kind of description. In this way, because Jackson can evade the skeptical arguments, Jackson can still claim that we have a priori access to A-intensions and, therefore, that conceptual analysis can still be considered a necessary condition of “serious metaphysics”.

## Serious Metaphysics and the Location Problem

Metaphysics seeks to explain the world and what the world is like. Furthermore, metaphysics seeks a *complete* account of the world, such that everything in the world is explained in terms of a limited set of more or less basic notions. Otherwise, metaphysics would be involved in no more than drawing up big lists. For this reason, Jackson defines “serious metaphysics” as a metaphysics that explains the world and everything in the world in the terms of some *limited* vocabulary, where this vocabulary is the most relevant vocabulary to the metaphysical theory that describes the basic notions of the metaphysics<sup>1</sup>. Jackson notes, however, that if we are committed to “serious metaphysics”, then we must also be committed to solving, what Jackson calls, the location problem.

In order to understand what Jackson means by the location problem, let us assume that physicalism is true. Because physicalism is an instance of “serious metaphysics”, if physicalism is true, then the world and everything in the world can, in principle, be explained in the physical vocabulary, i.e. the vocabulary of the natural sciences. However, the vocabulary of the natural sciences does not *explicitly* contain statements about terms like “belief”, “meaning”, “consciousness”, etc. Therefore, these kinds of terms are not explicitly a part of the physicalist’s theory. In this way, statements about the terms not explicitly included in the vocabulary of the “serious metaphysics” will not be accounted for by the “serious metaphysics”. This is an instance of the location problem and can be generalized for any “serious metaphysics”. Call the set of all true statements in the limited vocabulary of a “serious metaphysics” the *T*-statements and the set of all apparently true statements not explicitly contained within that vocabulary the *D*-statements. If one

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in the case of physicalism, the limited vocabulary would be the vocabulary of biology, chemistry, physics and neuroscience. Furthermore, it is important to note that, while I have defined “serious metaphysics” in linguistic terms, “serious metaphysics” can be equally well defined in ontological terms in the following way: a “serious metaphysics” is a metaphysics that explains the world and everything about the world in terms of a limited set of entities.

is committed to doing “serious metaphysics”, then one must show that *everything* in the world can be explained by the *T*-statements. Therefore, because “serious metaphysics” leads to the location problem, a theorist of a “serious metaphysics” has two options: 1) be an eliminativist about the objects the *D*-statements refer to or 2) show that the *D*-statements are somehow included in the *T*-statements.<sup>2</sup>

## Entry by Entailment and the Need for Conceptual Analysis

Jackson believes that we need to offer an account of how the *D*-statements can be included in the *T*-statements. He does this by suggesting that while the *D*-statements may not *explicitly* be contained in *T*-statements, they may still be *implicitly* contained in the *T*-statements. Jackson, therefore, distinguishes the explicit and implicit parts of a story. For example, I may *explicitly* tell you that Glenn Branca is better than every other composer. However, in stating this I have *implicitly* told you that Glenn Branca is better than Mozart. This is because the explicit statement *entails* the implicit statement, affording the implicit statement a part in the story. In the same way, the *T*-statements can implicitly contain *D*-statements because the *T*-statements entail the *D*-statements. Hence, Jackson’s solution to the location problem is to suggest that *D*-statements are entailed by the *T*-statements. This is what Jackson calls entry by entailment. Furthermore, because entry by entailment claims that the *T*-statements entail the *D*-statements and that, because of this, the *T*-statements provide a *complete* account of the world, Jackson is also committed to the ontological thesis that the entities *picked out* by the *T*-statements *supervene* on the entities picked out by the *D*-statements. In this way, a theorist of a “serious metaphysics” can claim that there is nothing over and above the entities picked out by the *T*-statements. Hence, Jackson suggests commitment to the following inter-world global supervenience thesis:

B) Any world that is a minimal<sup>3</sup> *T*-statement satisfying<sup>4</sup> duplicate of the actual world is a duplicate simpliciter.

Therefore, B) is true if and only if at any world in which the *T*-statements are true, the *D*-statements are true as well. In this way, commitment to B) will prevent independent variation between the *T*-statements and the *D*-statements relevant to each *T*-statement satisfying duplicate of the actual world. Again, this is because the *T*-statements entail the *D*-statements. In this way, Jackson solves the Location Problem by suggesting that the *D*-statements can find a place in the story of a “serious metaphysics” by being entailed by that story<sup>5</sup>.

However, if this is to be convincing, then Jackson must have *some* story to tell about *how* the *T*-statements entail the *D*-statements, for, as it stands now, there is an explanatory gap between showing that because the *T*-statements are true, the *D*-statements are true as well. According to Jackson, in order to fill this gap, we need to *define the subject*. Defining the subject is the *a priori* process of taking a term *K* and deriving the necessary and sufficient conditions for *counting as a K* by imagining the various possible situations in which something would count as a *K*. This process is guided by our intuitions concerning whether or not, if certain conditions obtained, these conditions would count as *K*. Insofar as our intuitions about *K* coincide with the folk intuitions about *K*, these

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2 It is important to note that while eliminativism about some areas of discourse might be a plausible position, Jackson believes that, with respect to the location problem, eliminativism is not an option. For example, “rivers”, “explosions”, “buildings” and a variety of other terms are not explicitly described in the language of natural science. In this way, if eliminativism was a plausible solution to the location problem, then we would be committed to the belief that explosions, buildings, rivers, etc. do not exist and this is clearly false.

3 Where “minimal” suggests setting the *T*-statement satisfying nature of the world and doing nothing more.

4 Where satisfying the *T*-statements is making the *T*-statements true.

5 Jackson, F. (1994) *Armchair Metaphysics*. In Michael, M. & O’Leary-Hawthorne, J. (eds.) *Philosophy in Mind: The Place of Philosophy in the Study of Mind*, pp. 23-34.

necessary and sufficient conditions will isolate the folk theory of *K*. Furthermore, because this process is a priori it is a species of conceptual analysis<sup>6</sup>. Jackson maintains that, once our folk theory of *K* has been a priori defined, we will know that *K* is associated with a rigidified definite description<sup>7</sup> consisting of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a *K*. If *K* is not explicitly contained within of the vocabulary of the relevant “serious metaphysics”, then knowledge of *K*’s description will explain, provided we have found some term in the vocabulary of the relevant “serious metaphysics” that satisfies *K*’s description, how *K* is actually contained within the relevant vocabulary. In this way, because statements about *K* would be included in the *D*-statements, Jackson can use conceptual analysis to explain how the *D*-statements are entailed by the *T*-statements. Therefore, conceptual analysis is a necessary part of solving the location problem and, hence, a necessary part of doing “serious metaphysics”.

## Two-Dimensional Semantics and the A Priori

The claim that discovering that the *T*-statements entail the *D*-statements occurs by a *a priori* conceptual analysis might seem overly contentious. For example, say that “gold” is not in the vocabulary of a “serious metaphysics” and, therefore, statements about gold will not be contained within the *D*-statements; while the symbol “Au” is in the vocabulary of the serious metaphysics and, therefore, statements about Au are contained within *T*-statements. If Jackson is correct, then our a priori knowledge of gold as the actual stuff that plays the gold-role should be sufficient to determine the referent of gold, namely Au. However, as Putnam and Kripke have shown, our a priori knowledge is not sufficient to show that gold is necessarily Au, rather our knowledge of this necessity is an a posteriori matter. Therefore, it might be objected that the apparent fact of a posteriori necessity is sufficient to show that a priori conceptual analysis is not a necessary part of explaining entry by entailment and, hence, solving the location problem.

In response to this claim, Jackson distinguishes between two different kinds of intensions, or functions from worlds to extensions. This distinction arises out of the different ways in which one can consider possible worlds. C-intensions are functions from worlds to extensions where the actual world  $w@$  is taken as fixed and the intension is used to pick out extensions in counterfactual worlds  $w_1...w_n$  with respect to  $w@$ . The C-intension, therefore, picks out the same extension in  $w_1...w_n$  as it does in  $w@$ . In this way, because gold is Au in  $w@$ , the C-intension of “gold” will pick out Au in all counterfactual worlds, regardless of the properties or descriptions associated with “gold” at those worlds. This is the intension that concerns the Kripke-Putnam cases. A-intensions, by contrast, are functions from worlds to extensions in which whatever world the A-intension is being used to pick out an extension in is *taken to be*  $w@$ . Moreover, Jackson believes that the A-intension of a natural kind term like “gold” corresponds to a rigidified definite description: The actual *X* that plays the gold-role. Therefore, the A-intension of “gold” at a world  $w_1$  where XYZ, instead of Au, performs the gold-role will pick out XYZ instead of Au. Jackson uses this distinction to evade the above criticism by claiming that all the criticism shows is that we do not have a priori access to C intensions. In spite of this, Jackson claims that we do have a priori access to A-intensions. Hence, we have a priori access to the rigidified definite description of “gold” and, therefore, we know a priori that:

- C) Gold is the actual stuff that plays the gold-role.

Moreover, Jackson maintains that our a priori knowledge of A-intensions allows for our a priori understanding that the *T*-statements entail the *D*-statements. For example, if statements about “gold” are members of the *D*-statements and statements about “Au” are members of the *T*-

<sup>6</sup> A paradigm instance of this would be the discourse on the Gettier cases concerning the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge.

<sup>7</sup> A rigidified definite description would usually correspond to a conjunction of the stereotypical features of a referent, a sortal, a uniqueness clause and a operator that specifies the actual world.

statements, then we can come to know that statements about “Au” entail statements about “gold” in the following way:

- A) Au is a precious metal. (Premise)
- B) Au is the actual stuff that plays the gold-role. (Empirical fact)
- C) Gold is the actual stuff that plays the gold-role. (A priori)
- D) Therefore, gold is a precious metal.

Notice that the above argument is valid a priori. This is because, once we have a priori access to the A-intension in C) and know all the relevant facts about the terms *within* the *T*-statements (premise B)), we can discover a priori that the *T*-statements entail the *D*-statements. Thus, Jackson is able to vindicate a priori conceptual analysis and its role in the entry by entailment thesis despite the Kripke-Putnam cases. In this way, Jackson can claim that conceptual analysis is essential to the entry by entailment thesis, solving of the Location Problem and, therefore, is a necessary part of doing “serious metaphysics”. This claim, however, *depends* on the claim that speakers have a priori access to A-intensions<sup>8</sup>.

### Objection from Epistemic Access to A-intension Stereotypes

Laurence and Margolis (LM) object to Jackson’s claim that conceptual analysis plays an essential role in “serious metaphysics”, by suggesting that our epistemic access to A-intensions is not a priori, but rather a posteriori. LM claim that knowledge of

- C) Gold is the actual stuff that plays the gold-role,

Requires knowing the stereotypical elements associated with gold. The gold-stereotype would presumably include that gold is a shiny-yellowish metal, traditionally involved in currency, etc. This is what knowledge of the “gold-role” consists in.

LM suggest that we cannot have a priori access to a description which picks out the referent of “gold” in each world  $w$  considered  $w@$ , because we don’t even have a priori access to a description that picks out the referent of “gold” in the actual  $w@$ . This is because *all* the elements of a natural kind stereotype are open to revision in light of empirical findings. This is because 1) the stereotype for a natural kind term *might* be based on atypical or idiosyncratic samples and 2) the conditions of observation *might* affect the characteristics of the natural kind, therefore, allowing for these characteristics to change over time. For example, for all we know, the introduction of a new gas into the atmosphere at a future time  $tF$  might cause gold to have a dull-red colour rather than a shiny-yellowish colour. Moreover, scientists and historians might discover that the “gold” that has traditionally been involved in various economic matters was actually a kind of fools gold rather than Au. If these cases obtained, then we would need to revise our gold-stereotype. Jackson might suggest that, because only a sufficient number of the elements associated with gold need to be satisfied, the fact that *some* of the elements of the gold-stereotype are a posteriori revisable should not pose a problem for his view. However, LM suggest that, *all* of the elements of the gold-stereotype are in principle revisable in this way, thus, blocking Jackson’s suggestion. Therefore, because revision of the gold-stereotype in light of empirical findings is a species of a posteriori knowledge, LM conclude that our knowledge of the gold-stereotype and, therefore, C) is not a priori but rather a posteriori. Therefore, because our knowledge of A-intensions is an a posteriori matter, conceptual analysis, conceived as an a priori process, is not a necessary part of “serious metaphysics”<sup>9</sup>.

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8 Jackson, F. (1998) *From Ethics to Metaphysics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 29-85.

9 Laurence, M. and Margolis, E. (2003) *Concepts and Conceptual Analysis. Philosophy and Phenomenological*

## Thought Experiment Response and Vindication of Conceptual Analysis

LM's argument is, however, too strong. The argument is too strong because LM claim that *all* of the elements of the gold-stereotype are in principle a posteriori revisable. In order to show that this claim is too strong, I will first present a thought experiment showing that 1) definite descriptions of some sort are necessary for an agent to know the referent of a term and 2) that these descriptions need not be anything substantial in terms of stereotypical properties, they merely need to delineate *some* kind of role that the natural kind plays. The first thought experiment is as follows:

TE1) Imagine two qualitatively identical steel spheres; the one on the left-hand side you have named "Jonny" and the one on the right-hand side you have named "Amanda". The spheres are then shuffled when you are not looking. Suppose that I ask you now which sphere is "Amanda" and which one is "Jonny". Can you refer in this case?

It should be obvious that, in this case, you will not be able to tell me which is "Amanda" and which is "Jonny" even though there is a fact of the matter that goes with the distribution of properties: Amanda is the one on the left-hand side that you named "Amanda" and "Jonny" is the one on the right-hand side that you named "Jonny". Moreover, the reason why you cannot know the referent in this case is precisely because you would have *no* description associated with either of the steel spheres<sup>10</sup>. It follows that 1) having *some* associated definite description about an object is a necessary condition being able to refer to that object. Furthermore, TE1) shows that 2) the description need not have anything to do with the stereotypical elements typically associated with the referent. All that is needed is that the description delineates *some* kind of role that the referent plays, in this case the role of being named either "Jonny" or "Amanda". In this way, Jackson's initial response to LM seems more plausible<sup>11</sup>: We only need *some* elements associated with the natural kind to be a part of the rigidified definite description.

We are now in a position to show that LM's claim is too strong. Remember, because LM claim that, in principle, *all* of elements of a natural kind's definite description can be revised in light of empirical findings, it should be the case that our description of gold could be completely revised and yet we would still be talking about gold. Consider the following thought experiment about another natural kind term "water":

TE2) Scientists have declared that, as we all know, water is H<sub>2</sub>O. But suppose that at some future time *tF* scientists discover that, contrary to what we thought, H<sub>2</sub>O was not the stuff that filled the lakes, came from the taps or had *any* of the properties typically associated with water. Scientists even discovered that H<sub>2</sub>O was not the object that caused us to say water when we talked about it and was not the thing that played the water-role in everyday life. H<sub>2</sub>O is actually always a black gas, it never caused us to say anything until recently, plays no role in nourishment, etc.

Would we say that, provided the above obtained, in talking about H<sub>2</sub>O, we are still talking about water? TE2) should make it clear that once *all* the elements of a referent's definite description have been revised in light of empirical findings, we would not say that we would still be talking about the relevant natural kind. Rather if TE2) obtained we would be compelled to say that we have changed the subject. In this way, LM cannot claim that all of the elements of a referent's rigidified definite

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*Research*, 67, No. 2, 260-263.

<sup>10</sup> Jackson, F. (2009) Replies to My Critics. In Ravenscroft, I. (ed.) *Mind, Ethics and Conditionals: Themes from the Philosophy of Frank Jackson*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 411-12.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, this *alone* does not prove that Jackson's response is correct, for it could still be the case that parts of the definite description are all a posteriori revisable.

description can be revised in light of empirical findings. Furthermore, as TE1) has shown, we must have access to some kind of definite description that delineates some role that the natural kind plays that is a priori, and not a posteriori revisable in order to refer to the natural kind at all<sup>12</sup>. In this way, because LM's universal claim is false, LM's argument does not go through. Therefore, not only can Jackson claim that only a sufficient number of the elements associated with gold need to be satisfied in order to refer, but also that we can still have a priori access to C) and, therefore, to A-intensions in general.

## Objection from Epistemic Access to the Theories that Determine A-intensions

While LM might not have convincingly shown that we do not have a priori access to A-intensions because the elements of a natural kind's rigidified definite description are a posteriori revisable, Laura Schroeter (LS) has presented an argument suggesting that we do not have a priori access to A-intensions because the *theories* which determine the rigidified definite description of a natural kind term are a posteriori revisable. Therefore, if LS is correct, then we cannot have a priori access to A-intensions and, therefore, conceptual analysis cannot plausibly be held to play an essential role in "serious metaphysics".

LS begins her argument with an analysis of the component parts of an A-intension<sup>13</sup> for a natural kind. She distinguishes between two distinct parts of a rigidified definite description: 1) a sortal and 2) an actual-world description. The sortal specifies what sort of object or property would qualify as a candidate for reference, while the actual-world description specifies the properties that must be satisfied in order for an object to fall into the extension of a concept in the actual extension of the concept. The actual-world description was the focus of LM's criticism. LS focuses on how one would come to know the sortal part of the rigidified definite description and, therefore, does not inherit the problems of LM's criticism. Furthermore, LS suggests that the sortal is a necessary part of an A-intension's rigidified definite description, for, if Jackson is to underwrite a priori conclusions about gold, then the analysis available to the subject on the basis of a priori reflection must make a substantive claim about the *kind* of object that gold is. This can only be done with a sortal.

Once this has been established, LS considers the kinds of intuitions that might a priori determine the nature of the sortal. Jackson further distinguishes first-order from second-order intuitions<sup>14</sup>. Our first-order intuitions are those intuitions which Jackson claims define the subject. By contrast, our second-order intuitions are our intuitions about how we should revise our first-order intuitions. These are, affectively, our best intuitions about how to theorize about natural kind terms. LS suggests that, in order to account for a sortal that is a) narrow enough to specify a determinate class of referents and b) broad enough to accommodate all the ways we think we might be mistaken about the nature of what we are referring to, our sortal must be determined by our second-order intuitions.

We are now in a position to articulate LS's claim that we do not have a priori access to A-intensions. LS claims that, because Jackson claims that we can know the rigidified definite descriptions for natural kind terms a priori, Jackson is committed to the claim that our best second-order intuitions are infallible, i.e. that they cannot be revised in light of empirical evidence. However, our second-order intuitions amount to our best theories about how to determine what gold is. In this way, because second-order intuitions determine what *counts as* a the kind of thing gold is, if we change our theory about how to determine what gold is, then Jackson is committed to that

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12 It may be the case that certain elements of the natural kind are more essential than others to the rigidified definite description. My arguments do not take a stance on which elements these might be, for all I intend to do is show that LM's argument is false and that Jackson can keep his original claim: that we need a priori knowledge of an A-intension in order to refer.

13 LS calls this a natural kind's reference-fixing conditions.

14 LS calls these first and second-order dispositions.

claim that we are changing the subject. LS, however, points out how implausible this claim is by considering the way Aristotle theorized about water. Aristotle had a radically different theory about the kind of thing that water is than we do today, and, therefore, Jackson would be committed to the claim that when Aristotle spoke of “water” he was not referring to what we refer to when we talk about “water” today. This, however, seems absurd. The more realistic story to tell is that our theories can, and should be, revised in light of empirical evidence and that, because theory determination is an a posteriori matter, we need not suggest that our second-order intuitions be infallible. Hence, we can still claim that, despite the difference in second-order intuitions, Aristotle referred to the same object that we do in our talk of water. In this way, because the theories that determine the sortal of the A-intensions associated with natural kind terms are a posteriori revisable, it follows that we cannot know the A-intensions of natural kind terms a priori<sup>15</sup>.

## Theory-nesting A-intension Response and Further Vindication of Conceptual Analysis

LS’s objection, however, rests on the assumption that the sortal of the rigidified definite description of the A-intension of a natural kind is determined by our best theories. It is for this reason that Jackson’s claim to our a priori access to A-intensions does not accurately account for our ability to refer in the face of changes in scientific theory. In this final section, I will show that by adopting a certain kind of rigidified definite description, one that *nests* theories and is not determined by theories, then Jackson can evade LS’s argument and claim that A-intension can be known a priori.

David Braddon-Mitchell<sup>16</sup> has developed the kind of rigidified definite description that Jackson needs in order to save his claim. Consider our folk theory of a natural kind term, in the sense specified above, to be a level-1 theory *T1* that says that gold is whatever plays the actual gold-role by some possibly unknown true theory *TT*. Furthermore, let *P1*, *P2* and *Pt* be terms in theories *T1*, *T2* and *TT* respectively. We are now in a position to state the theory-nesting rigidified definite description of gold:

TN) Gold is whatever plays the gold-role according to *T1* (Folk theory) that contains a term *P1* (gold) and a clause that associates with *P1* whatever second-order intuitions are associated with the term *Pt* of some true theory *TT* that explains the nature of what plays the gold-role actually<sup>17</sup>.

If Jackson adopts the rigidified definite description in TN) as the A-intension of gold, then he can evade LS’s objection. For example, call Aristotle’s theory about gold *T2*. Aristotle would consider *T2* = *TT*, for he would consider *T2* the true theory. Years later, empirical evidence suggests that *T2* is false and that our current theory *T3* = *TT*. In this case, the a posteriori change in theory does not entail that in moving from *T2* to *T3* one changes the subject, for, in each case, the rigidified definite description refers to whatever actually plays the gold-role. Rather, only our second-order intuitions change from *T2* to *T3*. In this way, TN) can be said to nest theories. Therefore, contrary to LS’s assumption, the A-intensions of natural kinds are not necessarily determined by our theories. Thus, a posteriori changes in theory do not present a challenge to our a priori access to A-intensions, provided Jackson adopts TN).

## Conclusion

Therefore, because Jackson can avoid the skeptical arguments against our a priori knowledge of A-intensions presented by both LM and LS, Jackson can still claim that a priori conceptual analysis is

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15 Schroeter, L. (2004) The Limits of Conceptual Analysis. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 85, 427-448.

16 Braddon-Mitchell, D. (2005) The Subsumption of Reference. *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 56, 157-60.

17 The rigidified definite description has been altered a bit to respond directly to LS’s objection.

an essential part of doing “serious metaphysics”. This claim, however, can only be made provided he puts certain constraints on the kind of rigidified definite description used as an A-intension. In this way, Jackson’s vindication of conceptual analysis is, perhaps, much more difficult to debunk than the skeptics have assumed.

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