

Conceptual Analysis, Thought Experiments, and Counterexamples

Philosophers are interested in understanding the nature of a wide range of complex properties or concepts. Just like a car might have parts, a complex property has parts.

For example, being a mother is a property that a person can have in virtue of having the property being-female and being-a-parent. So, we can say that in some sense the property of being-a-mother has the properties being-a-parent and being-female as parts.

We state those analyses in the form of definitions. Think of a candidate analysis as a kind of hypothesis. We then test that hypothesis with thought experiments to see if we can come up with any counterexamples. Thought experiments about possible scenarios are fair game (as data) because conceptual analyses purport to be *necessary truths*.

When someone offers up a conceptual analysis X is an A =df.) X is a B – They are effectively saying that there is *no possible scenario real or imaginary* where something is A but is not also B . That's why thought experiments are fair game.

EXAMPLE ONE: A BAD ANALYSIS

Only Dogs Have Teeth Theory

(ODT) X is a dog =df.) X has teeth

Thought experiment

Imagine a cat with teeth

Stating the Counterexample Precisely

IT CAN BE TRUE that something has teeth, (In the thought experiment above we imagined a possible cat. It's possible for that cat to have teeth.)

BUT FALSE that the thing is a dog. (Cats are not dogs, and neither is our possible cat)

Framed as an Argument

- (1) If ODT is true, then it is not possible for something to have teeth without being a dog.
- (2) It is possible for something to have teeth without being a dog.
- (3) Therefore, ODT is not true.

EXAMPLE TWO: ANOTHER BAD ANALYSIS

Another Bad Analysis

Parental Theory of Moral Obligation

(PTM) An act A is morally right for S to perform =df.) S 's parents tell S to do A .

Thought Experiment

Imagine a girl name Susie. Suppose her parents tell her to kill a bunch of people because those people didn't look both ways before they crossed the street. It doesn't seem that it's morally right for Susie to do that, even though her parents told her to.

Stating the Counterexample Precisely

IT COULD BE TRUE that someone's parents tell them to perform some action, (in the possible scenario above that's what happens)

BUT FALSE that it would be morally right for that person to perform the action. (in the possible scenario above it's not morally right for Susie to kill those people)

Framed as an Argument

- (1) If PTM is true, then it is morally right for Susie to kill those people.
- (2) It is not morally right for Susie to kill those people.
- (3) So, PTM is not true.