

CHAPTER I

THE BUSINESS OF ANALYSIS

I. WHAT IS CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS?

This book is designed to give the reader mastery over certain skills and techniques. Half the battle is won if you can get a clear idea of exactly what these skills and techniques are, and what purpose they serve: so we shall have to begin by spending a lot of time over this point. Techniques like being able to solve quadratic equations, doing Latin prose, or translating German into English are difficult to master: but at least we have the advantage of knowing just what it is that we are supposed to be doing, even if we do not always do it very well. These techniques and many others have for a long time been placed under different headings: they are what schools call 'subjects'—mathematics, Latin, German, and so on. Often we can look up the right answers to questions in these subjects, by referring to a dictionary, or a grammar, or an authoritative textbook. But none of this applies to the techniques outlined in this book. That is partly because they are new techniques: we have only become fully conscious of them in the last twenty or thirty years. But it is chiefly because of the nature of the techniques themselves, and the general purpose which they serve.

What are these techniques *like*? They are not like 'subjects' such as Latin or mathematics, which have clear-cut and well-defined rules, and in which answers

are indisputably right or wrong. They are rather more like specific skills such as the ability to swim well or play a good game of football. But they are most of all like general skills which have wide application, such as the skills we refer to when we talk of 'seamanship', or 'having a good eye', or 'being able to express oneself'. These general skills are useful in a great many different activities; thus seamanship is useful in sailing, manning a lifeboat, rescuing people from a wreck, and so on: having a good eye is a great advantage in any ball game: and the ability to express oneself in words helps us in writing essays, letters and reports, as well as in making our feelings and needs clear to other people. Yet though the skills come into many different activities, we can see that the same skills are at work in each case. To take one more example: although we spend a lot of time mixing with other people in many different circumstances—at home, at school, in the army, in a factory, on holiday—yet we can still distinguish a special skill or ability which we call 'being able to get on well with other people'. This skill is something which we can cultivate: but we can see that learning such a skill is going to be very different from learning Latin or mathematics.

We can most easily grasp the nature of these techniques by looking at the sort of questions which they help us to answer. Consider first a pair of questions:

- (i) Is a whale able to sink a 15,000 ton liner?
- (ii) Is a whale a fish?

We can describe the first as a question of fact. To be in a position to answer it, all we have to do is to find out the relevant facts: either by personal experience, or by

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getting reliable information from others. We may have to put the facts together and work the problem out: thus we may be able to answer the question without actually having seen a whale sink a ship, and without having been reliably told that it can—if, for instance, we knew the weight and speed of whales, the thickness of ships' hulls, and so on. But even in this case we would not be straying beyond the realm of fact. To answer the question, we need only knowledge about the world and some things in the world. But the second question is not like this. We might know all the relevant facts about whales and about fish, and still be in doubt about how to answer it. For instance, we might know that whales suckle their young like other mammals, and that they swim like other fish, and a great many other facts about them. But this might still leave us undecided, because we would not be sure whether a creature of this kind counts as a fish or not. We would still have to ask a question like 'Does a whale (being what it is) come into the category of "fish", or not?'

It is important to notice that this is not a question like the question about the whale and the liner. It is a question of a certain distinct kind, a kind which the techniques we have mentioned are designed to deal with. I shall call these questions by the general name of *questions of concept*. Thus, in this example, the word 'fish' does not just stand for lots of actual fish swimming around in the sea: it also represents an idea, a concept of what a 'fish' is—what the word designates in our language. We can see this best by repeating this particular question in various forms. Thus we could ask 'Does a whale come under the concept of fish, as we

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normally use that concept?’ or ‘Does the concept of fish normally include things like whales?’ or ‘Does what we normally mean by “a fish” cover whales or not?’ To rephrase the question in these ways, which may seem unnecessary and fussy, draws attention to the point that the question is about *meaning*: what we want to know is what we normally mean by ‘fish’, how one verifies whether something is a fish or not, what *counts* as a fish.

We can also notice another thing about this question, which may seem curious. The answer depends on what is meant by ‘fish’: and it is a mistake to think that ‘fish’ means one thing and one thing only. If you are a professional biologist or an expert on fish, you will probably say that a whale is not a fish, or ‘not really’ a fish: because biologists classify creatures in such a way that mammals come into one group and fish into another. Creatures which are mammals, like whales, are by this not allowed to count as fish: the concept of fish excludes mammals. But if you are working in the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (which deals with whales along with everything else that swims in the sea), you will probably not pay much attention to this biological classification: you will have a classification of your own, which will include whales in the concept of fish. The ordinary person, unless he happens to know some biology, would probably also call a whale a fish. Thus whether you call a whale a fish or not depends entirely on what angle you look at it from. Nor can we say that one viewpoint is better than another—that the biologist, for instance, has a better right to an opinion than the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries. One view-

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point is better for some purposes, another for other purposes.

We can see these points more clearly, and go rather more deeply into them, if we take another pair of examples. Consider the questions:

(i) Is a flying-boat capable of landing on choppy water?

(ii) Is a flying-boat a boat or an aeroplane?

Again we can see that the first is a straightforward question of fact, the second a more complex question of concept. To answer the first we need personal or second-hand experience and observation: to answer the second we need to consider the concepts *boat* and *aeroplane*, and see into which category a flying-boat would come. And again, we can see that there is no single right answer for all circumstances. If one is concerned with, say, mooring-space in a river, or protecting seabirds from being disturbed while nesting, one would count a flying-boat as a boat: whereas if one is concerned with dropping bombs, or swiftness of travel, one would count it as an aeroplane. It is a mistake to say that it is 'really' a boat or 'really' an aeroplane. Once one knows what a flying-boat in fact is—once one has described all its characteristics—it is a matter of the particular circumstances whether one calls it a boat or an aeroplane.

But even though it is a question of *concept* and not of simple *fact*, it makes a big difference how we decide to use our concepts: our decisions can be wise or unwise. For instance, if we asked a clerk at an airline office whether there was an aeroplane which could take us to New York by Tuesday, and he said 'No', we should be

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justifiably annoyed to find that although there were no ordinary aeroplanes there was in fact a flying-boat. And if we approached the clerk and said 'Look here, you've misled me: there's a flying-boat which leaves at just the time I want. Why didn't you tell me about it?', and the clerk said 'Oh, well, flying-boats aren't aeroplanes, they're boats', we should still be annoyed. We should think that the clerk had been stupid in his application of the concepts of a boat and an aeroplane. The point here is that words are meant to serve human purposes and desires, and must be used in such a way as to serve them efficiently. The clerk was stupid because he did not grasp the general context and purpose of our inquiry, which was concerned only with getting some quick means of transport to New York: in the light of this context and purpose flying-boats ought to count as aeroplanes. The clerk might do well in a harbour-master's office, where they are concerned with buoys and mooring-space and where flying-boats ought to count as boats: but he is no good in an airline.

This is a very simple example which shows the nature of a question of concept in its basic essentials: but it may be inadequate to show that such questions are of great practical importance. Airline clerks are not often as stupid as that. But now suppose we ask another question of concept: 'Is psychology a science?' We would first find out the facts about psychology, and perhaps end up by agreeing that it had some things in common with sciences like physics and chemistry, and some characteristics which were quite different: so that it was a matter of choice whether we called it a science or not. Now the choice might seem purely academic. But

suppose we are called on to decide the question before a committee which had the power to give large sums of money for research in science. The committee might say 'Now tell us, is psychology really a science, or is it more like astrology and crystal-gazing and witchcraft?' We might then have to choose whether to put psychology in the 'science' category, or in the 'astrology-and-witchcraft' category: and whichever we did, it would have a very considerable effect on the future of the subject. We might decide to call it a science, or not to call it a science: or we might want to invent a third category, and call it perhaps 'in principle a science' or 'a potential science'. It would be very important to be quite clear about the concepts in this case: we could not begin to make a sensible choice until we had analysed and understood what was meant by 'science' or 'a potential science'. This is obviously more difficult than understanding the concepts of an aeroplane and a boat.

Before moving on to consider the more complex questions of concept with which our techniques deal, however, we must try to state more clearly what exactly it is that we are concerned with when we analyse concepts. We know we are not concerned with finding new facts. It is also important to realise that we are not concerned with values or moral judgements, with what is actually right or wrong, good or bad. Consider these three questions:

- (i) Is Communism likely to spread all over the world?
- (ii) Is Communism a desirable system of government?
- (iii) Is Communism compatible with democracy?

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The first question is a question of fact. We may not be able to give a definite answer which we could prove to be right, because the question asks us to predict the future: but the only relevant evidence for our answer consists of facts about Communism and about the world. The answer may be doubtful, but it is not doubtful because we are in doubt about either the *value* of Communism or the *concept* of Communism: it is only doubtful because we are not certain which way the facts point—or perhaps we just need more facts. The second question, on the other hand, asks us to assign some kind of value to Communism: we are asked whether it is good or bad, wise or unwise, right or wrong, politically desirable or undesirable. This, then, is a question of value. But the third question is a question of concept. We have to consider whether the concept of Communism fits or does not fit into the concept of democracy. As usual, the answer may turn out to be a matter of choice in the end: probably it partly fits, and partly fails to fit. There would be no point in asking a question of concept if the answer was obvious: a question like ‘Is tyranny compatible with democracy?’ is silly, because we all know that the concepts are diametrically opposed.

What are we really dealing with, then, when we analyse concepts, if we are not dealing with facts or values? In a sense it is true that we are ‘just dealing with words’—words like ‘boat’, ‘science’, ‘democracy’ and so on. But it is misleading to say this, because it implies that we are dealing with something that has no real or practical importance: whereas we have seen, in the cases of the airline clerk and the committee deciding

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on research grants for science, that the way in which we decide to fix our concepts (or use our words, if you like) is of considerable importance. One might say, if one was sitting on a jury and asked to decide whether a prisoner was guilty or not guilty, ‘Oh, well, it just depends what you mean by “guilty”, it’s just a matter of words and definitions’: and this would be very misleading.

We said earlier that questions of concept were concerned with meaning: and though this too is true, it is inadequate. Suppose that we say that the question ‘Is a flying-boat a boat?’ is concerned with the meaning of the word ‘boat’. It is a little queer to say this, because we know perfectly well what the word ‘boat’ means. It is not a particularly unusual or extraordinary word, like ‘asymptotic’ or ‘polymorphous’: if we know French or German, we can translate it into those languages without difficulty. This is also true of more complex words like ‘science’, ‘Communism’, ‘democracy’ and so on. In one sense we know quite well what these words mean; and if we did not, we could always look them up in a dictionary. To take another example: suppose someone said ‘That’s a good book’, and we asked him ‘What do you mean, a *good* book?’ This is a perfectly reasonable question: and it is also a question of concept, because what we want to know is what counts as ‘a good book’ with him. (It is as if someone said ‘Communism is perfectly democratic’, and we were to ask ‘What do you mean, democratic?’) Yet it would be wrong to say that we were asking for the meaning of the word ‘good’. ‘Good’ is a very common word, which we use correctly every day: it means,

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roughly, 'to be commended' or 'to be approved' or 'desirable'. We know this already. Yet we still ask 'What do you mean, a *good* book?'

The best way of looking at this point is to say that in questions of concept we are not concerned with *the* meaning of a word. Words do not have only one meaning: indeed, in a sense they do not have meaning in their own right at all, but only in so far as people use them in different ways. It is better to say that we are concerned with *actual and possible uses* of words. That is why it is no use looking up the word in a dictionary: it will not help. When we ask 'What do you mean, a *good* book?' what we are really saying is 'What counts as a good book with you?' or 'What are your criteria for a good book?' Sometimes we behave as if all we had to do was to find out the 'real' meaning of a word like 'democracy' or 'boat' or 'science', and then the answer to our question would be obvious. But unfortunately it is not so simple as that: and a moment's thought will show us that words like 'democracy' and 'science'—and even words like 'boat'—do not have 'real meanings'. They just have different uses and different applications: and our job is to analyse the concepts and map out these uses and applications.

In the same way we must not make the mistake of thinking that answering questions of concept is a matter of 'defining one's terms', and that we should begin by producing a definition of 'science', 'democracy', etc. For the whole point of asking such questions is that the definition of these words is unclear: or we might rather say that they do not have definitions, but only uses. Of course there are some words which do have precise