



# Conceptual analysis without concepts

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## Abstract

“Conceptual analysis” is a misnomer—it refers, but it does not refer to a method or practice that involves the analysis of concepts. Once this is recognized, many of the main arguments for skepticism about conceptual analysis can be answered, since many of these arguments falsely assume that conceptual analyses target concepts. The present paper defends conceptual analysis from skepticism about its viability and, positively, presents an argument for viewing conceptual analyses as targeting philosophical phenomena, not our concepts of these phenomena.

**Keywords** Conceptual analysis · Concepts · Intuition · Metaphilosophy · Methodology · Philosophical phenomena

Although there are notable exceptions,<sup>1</sup> many philosophers are skeptical of the viability and fruitfulness of conceptual analysis.<sup>2</sup> I think this attitude is unwarranted and will argue that much of the skepticism surrounding conceptual analysis is rooted in a fairly simple, though understandable, misunderstanding, a misunderstanding that involves taking the label, “conceptual analysis” to be an apt label. But “conceptual analysis” is not an apt label; the term is a misnomer. Like other misnomers, “conceptual analysis”

<sup>1</sup> Chief among proclaimed non-skeptics is Frank Jackson (1998), although, as will become clear as the paper proceeds, I do not defend conceptual analysis as Jackson understands it. (See Sect. 3.3 for more on the difference between Jacksonian analysis and conceptual analysis.) Another notable non-skeptic is Brian Weatherson (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Skeptics include Stephen Stich (1988, 1992, 1996), Hilary Kornblith (1998, 2002, 2006, 2014, 2017) David Papineau (1993, 2009, 2014), Michael Devitt (1996, 2014), Michael Tye (1992), Stephen Laurence and Eric Margolis (1999, 2003), Mark Johnston and Sara-Jane Leslie (2012), William Ramsey (1992), Laura Schroeter (2004), Michael Huemer (2015), Andrew Melnyk (2008), Edouard Machery (2009, 2017) and Herman Cappelen (2012, 2018), as well as proponents of “negative program” experimental philosophy, as represented, e.g., by Weinberg et al. (2001) and Machery et al. (2004). This leaves out a large literature in psychology claiming to debunk philosophical conceptual analysis (e.g., Rosch and Mervis 1975), though several of the skeptics in this list are heavily influenced by this literature.

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mischaracterizes its referent. To put it somewhat paradoxically (which is something misnomers sometimes force one to do), when philosophers offer conceptual analyses, they are not offering analyses of concepts. Discussions of the Thousand Days' War are not discussions of a war that lasted one thousand days (it lasted longer). When you bump your funny bone, you have not bumped a bone (it is your ulnar nerve). Likewise, philosophers engaged in conceptual analysis are not engaged in the analysis of concepts. Once this is recognized—once it is acknowledged that the “conceptual” in “conceptual analysis” is a mischaracterization—many of the main grounds for skepticism about the practice evaporate, since, as I will argue, many of these grounds are tied to the assumption that conceptual analysis is the analysis of concepts.

If conceptual analysis is not the analysis of concepts, then what is it? Core examples of conceptual analysis are analyses, or rejections of analyses,<sup>3</sup> of mostly *nonconceptual* philosophical *phenomena*, such as knowledge, freedom, personal identity, moral rightness, reference, and causation—not our concepts of these things. Take contemporary epistemology's interest in “what it is” to know. This is an interest in knowledge—knowledge *itself*, as it is appropriate to emphasize<sup>4</sup>—not the concept of knowledge. A conceptual analysis of knowledge does not aim to say what the *concept* of knowledge involves or is like; rather, it aims to say what knowledge involves or is like. Recognizing this about conceptual analysis, generally, reveals that skepticism about conceptual analysis is really skepticism about something else—and that this something else is something in which conceptual analysts do not even engage.

Although I will argue that conceptual analysts analyze philosophical phenomena, not our concepts of these phenomena, I attach no special meaning to “philosophical phenomena”. A phenomenon is a philosophical phenomenon simply by virtue of being of interest to philosophers. Knowledge, freedom, personal identity, etc. are philosophical phenomena because philosophers take an interest in these things; there is no more and no less to being a philosophical phenomenon than that, given how I intend “philosophical phenomenon” to be understood here. In particular, I don't mean to suggest that there are *non-philosophical kinds* of knowledge, freedom, personal identity etc., and I will just assume, without argument, that knowledge, for example, is the same phenomenon referred to by philosophers and ordinary speakers alike, when using the word “knowledge”.<sup>5</sup> The crucial distinction, for my purposes, is not that between philosophical and non-philosophical phenomena, but rather between philosophical

<sup>3</sup> Some of the core examples of conceptual analysis involve using thought-experimental counterexamples against other examples of conceptual analysis. The so-called “method of cases”, as I understand it, is just more conceptual analysis. The method of cases involves testing philosophical theory, conceived as a product of conceptual analysis, against hypothetical cases, also conceived as products of conceptual analysis. If this is not perfectly clear at this stage, it should be once I present several examples of projects of conceptual analysis in Sect. 1.

<sup>4</sup> This emphasis should be unnecessary, since “knowledge” refers to knowledge (itself), not the concept of knowledge. But a main theme of the present paper is that many questions characteristic of analytic philosophy, such as the question of what it is to know, are routinely misinterpreted to concern concepts.

<sup>5</sup> An anonymous referee (this journal) pressed me to say something, as I have in the main text, about how I understand “philosophical phenomena”. Another negative characterization: I intend no contrast between philosophical phenomena and, for example, *physical* phenomena. Causation is both a physical phenomenon and a philosophical one, for instance. More generally, some of the many phenomena in which philosophers take an interest are straightforwardly physical phenomena.

phenomena and our *concepts of* these phenomena. The mistake I think methodologists have been making about conceptual analysis is the mistake of thinking that conceptual analyses are analyses of concepts. I will argue that these are analyses of the phenomena (themselves) instead.

Readers familiar with Hilary Kornblith's (1998, 2002, 2006, 2014, 2017) methodological views will recognize something Kornblithian in this "phenomena, not concepts" view of philosophy. Kornblith is known for insisting (I think rightly) that philosophical phenomena, not our concepts of these phenomena, are the *subject matter* of philosophy. However, Kornblith also expresses skepticism about conceptual analysis. In effect, what I will be arguing is that he should not: Kornblith, and others attracted to the idea that the subject matter of epistemology, for example, is knowledge, not the concept of knowledge, have no good reason for skepticism about conceptual analysis.<sup>6</sup> Concepts are not the subject matter of conceptual analyses either. Conceptual analysts analyze philosophical phenomena, not the concepts of these phenomena.

Since I aim to defend conceptual analysis without defending any procedure or practice that is or involves the analysis of concepts, I call the practices and procedures I defend "conceptual analysis without concepts". This label turns an ordinary misnomer into something close to an oxymoron. Still, it is a useful label, since it brings out what is distinctive about my view, namely that, although "conceptual analysis" refers to certain practices and procedures that are, in fact, fruitfully employed in philosophy, these practices and procedures have nothing to do with concepts. It also echoes Herman Cappelen's (2012) nice phrase (and the title of one of his recent books): "philosophy without intuitions". Like Cappelen, I am convinced that philosophy does not rely on intuitions. In fact, as I will explain below, philosophy's non-reliance on intuitions is part of my case against skepticism about conceptual analysis. Ultimately, I will defend a concept *and* intuition-free understanding of conceptual analysis.

In case it is not perfectly clear from the above, the concept-free understanding of conceptual analysis that I will defend is, I will argue, the *correct* understanding of what is (according to me) an actual philosophical practice or set of practices, those usually referred to simply as "conceptual analysis". In other words, "conceptual analysis", as it is ordinarily used, is co-referential with my oxymoronic label, "conceptual analysis without concepts". I do not seek to "conceptually engineer", or offer a "revisionist analysis" of, conceptual analysis.<sup>7</sup> For example, I will not argue that "conceptual analysis" *should* refer to practices that don't target concepts. I think it already does

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Williamson's (2007) argument for taking philosophical questions at "face value" is another example of this Kornblithian view of the subject matter of philosophy, though Williamson also expresses skepticism about conceptual analysis and the alleged "conceptual turn" in philosophy. Even Stephen Stich (1988, 1992), who is known for strongly skeptical views about analytic philosophy generally, and conceptual analysis especially, seems sympathetic to something like the Kornblithian view. Stich's version of the Kornblithian view is criticized by Brian Weatherston (2003), who claims (mistakenly, I think) that Stich's version verges on incoherence.

<sup>7</sup> "Conceptual engineering" and "revisionist analysis" are different labels for roughly the same kind of intellectual activity: the attempt to answer the normative question of which concepts, philosophical and otherwise, we *should* be using, both in ordinary thought and talk, and in our theorizing. Its roots trace back at least to Carnap (1950) and Quine (1960). For a recent overview and defense of conceptual engineering/revisionism, especially as a method of philosophy, see Cappelen 2018. The essays collected in Haslanger 2012 are also a good starting place, both for understanding the aims of conceptual engineering, and for very interesting examples of revisionist analysis in action.

refer, and always has referred, to such practices, and I seek to describe and defend these practices as they are.<sup>8</sup> In fact, ideas that underlie the new movement towards conceptual engineering/revisionism serve, in some philosophers' thinking, as still more grounds for skepticism about the bad old kind of conceptual analysis, the bad old kind I seek to defend. I reject these newer grounds for skepticism for reasons I will explain below (in Sect. 2.1.3). But I want it to be clear from the outset that, as I conceive of it, this paper is a defense of an entirely traditional philosophical method, one that has been with us arguably since Plato: conceptual analysis.

The paper has a simple structure. In Sect. 1, I give examples of philosophical projects that many have regarded as involving conceptual analysis. In Sect. 2, I describe the main grounds for skepticism about conceptual analysis and argue that, in each case, these grounds do not justify this skepticism. I reply to potential worries about my defense of conceptual analysis, including one to the effect that my defense turns on a "merely verbal" issue, in Sect. 3. Section 4 is a brief concluding section.

## 1 Projects thought to involve conceptual analysis

It is difficult to think of projects in analytic philosophy that have *not* been regarded as, at least in part, involving conceptual analysis. In this section, I will briefly describe a few of the projects that have. The list is short (six different examples), but hopefully gives a feel for the wide variety of philosophical projects said to involve conceptual analysis. My aim in this section is just to list putative examples without much commentary or explanation. Later, in Sect. 2, when defending conceptual analysis from skepticism about the practice, I will have more to say about these examples.

### 1.1 The JTB theory and Gettier's counterexamples

The JTB theory of knowledge is regarded by most epistemologists as the product of conceptual analysis. So is the famous challenge to this theory via the discovery of "Gettier cases". The JTB theory and the Gettier case counterexamples thus display two broad uses of conceptual analysis, a positive, theory-construction use, said to be involved in the postulation of the JTB-theory, and a negative, counterexamplifying use, said to be involved in the discovery of Gettier's counterexamples.

### 1.2 Free will, moral responsibility, and Frankfurt cases

Positions in philosophical debates over free will are regarded as resulting from conceptual analysis. The view that free will is a condition on moral responsibility is regarded as a partial analysis of moral responsibility, for example. So too is the view

<sup>8</sup> As an anonymous referee (this journal) points out, however, I *will* engage in what can be described as "terminological engineering", since I think many philosophers are wrong about the reference of "conceptual analysis" and that they ought to correct this mistake. Doing so does not require adopting a new label (such as "conceptual analysis without concepts") but it does require being cognizant, at least, of the misleadingness of "conceptual analysis".

that this partial analysis is incorrect, since thought experimental cases—the Frankfurt cases—allegedly show otherwise.

### 1.3 Criteria of personal identity

Some arguments over personal identity pit psychological accounts against bodily accounts. Psychological accounts are widely viewed as the result of conceptual analysis. In particular, many metaphysicians take conceptual analysis to reveal the alleged possibility of “body-switching”, a possibility presumed to show that personal identity is, or is grounded in, psychological relations. Similarly, the conclusion that personal identity *can't* be grounded in psychological relations is taken to be a product of the negative, counterexamplifying form of conceptual analysis, for there appear to be possible cases in which a person-at-a-time bears the allegedly identity-sustaining psychological relations to two or more *distinct* persons, existing at a later (or earlier) time.

### 1.4 Consequentialism and trolley cases

Many consequentialists think that consequentialism, the view that the morally right action is the one that produces the best consequences, is a product of conceptual analysis. Some “trolley problem” thought experiments seem to confirm consequentialism but, notoriously, others seem to conflict with its predictions. Here, once again, we have dueling forms of conceptual analysis, one form, the positive variety, seeming to lend support to consequentialism, with the other form, the negative variety, seeming to reveal counterexamples to it.

### 1.5 The metasemantics of names

Debates in metasemantics are debates over the how the reference of our terms is determined. A well-known example concerns the metasemantics of proper names. Is reference for proper names fixed by description, as Frege and Russell appear to have held, or is a Kripkean, “causal-historical” theory correct? Both descriptivism and the causal-historical theory are thought to be supported by conceptual analyses of reference and reference-determination.

### 1.6 Causation and omissions

Analytic metaphysics has produced a variety of theories of causation, all of which are said to be products of conceptual analysis. A central debate in this area is whether “omissions”—roughly, an event’s *failing* to occur, such as failing to water the plants—can count as causes (of the plants dying, e.g.). Some theories of causation accommodate omissions as causes; others don’t. What seems uncontroversial is that the moves made in the debate over whether omissions can be causes are moves borne of dueling conceptual analyses: the pro side uses conceptual analysis to argue that

some omissions are genuinely causes, while the con side uses it to explain away what is, according to it, merely the appearance of genuine causation.<sup>9</sup>

## 2 Skepticism and the concept assumption

In this section, I present, and reply to, the main lines of skepticism about conceptual analysis. Before doing so, however, I want to describe what I take to be the basic reason for *anti*-skepticism about the practice. The basic reason is this. The projects listed in Sect. 1 are perfectly respectable, viable, and, in some cases, fruitful philosophical projects. And they are projects of conceptual analysis. Hence, there are plenty of respectable, viable, and fruitful projects of conceptual analysis in philosophy and there must be some error in skeptical arguments against the practice.

Although I was careful to describe the projects in Sect. 1 as projects *thought* to involve conceptual analysis, so as not to beg the question I am now addressing, my view is that all of the listed projects *really are* projects of conceptual analysis. What makes them such? On my view, they count as projects of conceptual analysis mostly<sup>10</sup> because the *label*, “conceptual analysis”, is regularly used to refer to these very projects, and ones like them. Crucially, however, they are not projects that involve analyzing concepts. If I am right about the semantics of the label, and right about its extension, then “conceptual analysis” is a misnomer. Offering Gettier-style counterexamples to the JTB theory, for example, is to engage in conceptual analysis, even though that project has nothing to do with concepts and so, in particular, does not involve analyzing the concept of knowledge.

There should not be anything especially puzzling about “misnomic reference”, as it might be described. Consider, again, the Thousand Days’ War, or Kripke’s nice example (apparently borrowed from Voltaire): The Holy Roman Empire. The Thousand Days’ War lasted longer than a thousand days but it was at least (though sadly) a war. The Holy Roman Empire, as Kripke reminded us, was neither holy, Roman, nor an empire. And yet, and as the claims I just made require, “the Thousand Days’ War” and “the Holy Roman Empire” refer; they are not “empty terms”. “Conceptual analysis” is not an empty term either. The projects described in Sect. 1 are all in its extension. It is just that “conceptual analysis” is more name-like than descriptive, as many misnomers are.

The picture emerging is this. We have a label, “conceptual analysis”, with a long (relative to the relatively short lifespan of analytic philosophy thus far) history. It is now used to refer to projects such as those listed in Sect. 1. Historically, it has been used to refer to some of the same projects and others at least roughly similar too. That

<sup>9</sup> I have, in these brief descriptions of these projects, characterized them as attempts to analyze things like moral responsibility and causation. Does that stack the deck in favor of the view that they are not projects seeking to analyze concepts instead? I don’t think so, since characterizing the projects in this way is routine. Even methodologists who think that conceptual analysts analyze concepts would accept my descriptions as accurate. They would just insist that “an analysis of moral responsibility” for example, describes an analysis of the *concept* of moral responsibility.

<sup>10</sup> I say “mostly” because there is also a historical piece of the story that connects current uses of “conceptual analysis” to earlier uses of it and related terms. I say more about this history later, in Sect. 3.2.

suffices to give “conceptual analysis” an extension, and we can now ask whether there are any good grounds for skepticism about the projects that fall into this extension.

Many of the skeptical objections to conceptual analysis that I will consider depend on assuming that the *target* (the analysandum) of any conceptual analysis is a *concept*. I call this the *Concept Assumption*. The Concept Assumption is understandable; it is, after all, what the label, “conceptual analysis”, would lead one to assume. Nevertheless, as I have claimed, and as I will argue more fully below, the Concept Assumption is false. The projects described in Sect. 1 are conceptual analyses, misnomerically, though correctly, so-called, but none of them are analyses of concepts. Rather, they are analyses of philosophical phenomena.

However, not all of the skeptical objections to conceptual analysis depend on the Concept Assumption. For example, one often hears from skeptical quarters that *there are no successful examples of conceptual analysis*. Later, in Sect. 2.2.2, I label this the *Bad Track-Record Objection*, and I offer a reply. Here, I simply want to highlight the fact that some skeptical objections to conceptual analysis, including the Bad Track-Record Objection, do not—or need not, anyway—assume that conceptual analyses target concepts. That is, some skeptical objections do not depend on the Concept Assumption. For example, one could think that conceptual analysis has never succeeded, just as the Bad Track-Record Objection maintains, even if one thinks, correctly, by my lights, that conceptual analyses are (attempted) analyses of philosophical phenomena, not concepts.

Below, this section is divided into two main subsections. In Sect. 2.1, I discuss skeptical objections to conceptual analysis that depend on the Concept Assumption. In Sect. 2.2, I discuss objections that do not. In total, I will present, and reply to, eight different skeptical objections to conceptual analysis, five in Sect. 2.1, and three in Sect. 2.2.

There is a sense in which most of the skeptical objections to conceptual analysis fail for the same basic reason: they depend on the false Concept Assumption. Still, it is instructive to see precisely how, in each case, the Concept Assumption has led those skeptics who assume it astray. In the case of the minority of skeptical objections that do not depend on the Concept Assumption, there is no underlying basic reason for their failure. Nevertheless, as I will show, each of these fails for reasons particular to each.

Defending conceptual analysis from eight different skeptical objections can’t *prove* that skepticism about the practice is unjustified. Perhaps there is a ninth objection, not considered here, that seals the skeptical deal. Still, I think that my replies to these eight will show that there are far fewer good reasons for skepticism about conceptual analysis than many have supposed, and thus that anti-skepticism is the more reasonable attitude.

## 2.1 Skeptical objections based on the concept assumption

### 2.1.1 The no-theory, anti-classicism, and psychology objections

What *are* concepts? There is no widely accepted answer. Some say that concepts are mental representations, structured as sets of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions on their application. Others claim that concepts are, instead, representations of typical members of the relevant category. Still others say that concepts are “tacit theories” of the represented kind. These accounts conflict; they can’t all be right.<sup>11</sup> But we do not know which is. Hence, we do not know what concepts are. The “we” here includes philosophers who engage in conceptual analysis, so *conceptual analysts don’t know what it is they are analyzing*. Surely this undermines whatever it is they are attempting to do when they say they are analyzing concepts. Call this the *No Theory Objection* to conceptual analysis.<sup>12</sup>

Some skeptics claim that we do know at least that the first of the accounts of concepts described above, the account known as *Classicism* (or *Definitionism*) is false. Results in the psychology of concepts, some of which I will soon describe, demonstrate that concepts are *not* representations of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions on membership in the relevant kind or category. According to these skeptics, the problem with conceptual analysis is not that conceptual analysts have no theory of concepts, it is rather that they presuppose a false, Classicist theory: conceptual analysts take central philosophical concepts, like the concepts of knowledge, freedom, and moral rightness, to be representations of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions on their application. But this is a mistake; *concepts simply are not what the Classical theory takes them to be*. Call this the *Anti-Classicism Objection*.<sup>13</sup>

My basic reply to the No Theory and Anti-Classicism objections is simple: these objections depend on the Concept Assumption. But conceptual analysts are not offering analyses *of concepts*; the Concept Assumption is false. Consider the projects described in Sect. 1. My descriptions of these projects made no use of terms like “the concept of knowledge” or “the concept of causation”. So why think that lacking a theory *of concepts*, or adhering to a false theory *of concepts*, would undermine any of them?

Consider some instance of what I described in Sect. 1 as the negative, counterexamplifying use of conceptual analysis, say the use of Frankfurt cases as a challenge to a free will condition on moral responsibility. How is the No Theory Objection meant to apply here? A philosopher who uses Frankfurt cases in this way thinks that the possi-

<sup>11</sup> I am here contrasting Classicist, Prototype, and Theory-Theory accounts of concepts. Edouard Machery (2009) provides a useful recent review of these different theories of concepts. The theories conflict in the sense that they can’t all be true of some non-disjunctive notion of concept. Perhaps “concept pluralists”, such as Daniel Weiskopf (2009), would insist that there are simply different *kinds* of concepts, each characterized by the differing accounts of categorization offered by the differing theories. Concept pluralists might, on this basis, resist the inference to the No Theory Objection to conceptual analysis.

<sup>12</sup> Some, including perhaps Machery himself, take the “concept eliminativism” of Machery 2009 to imply the No Theory Objection. Cappelen (2012) explicitly endorses something quite close to the No Theory Objection. (See Cappelen 2012, p. 209.).

<sup>13</sup> See Stich (1992) and Ramsey (1992) for versions of the Anti-Classicism Objection. Johnston and Leslie (2012) contains a more recent version.

ble existence of such cases shows that the free will condition does not hold. A widely accepted theory of concepts is no more needed to support this use of Frankfurt cases than is a widely accepted theory of bees or presidential power. Concepts, bees, and presidential power are all completely irrelevant to the question of whether Frankfurt cases can be used to show that free will is not a condition on moral responsibility. The No Theory Objection fails to justify skepticism about conceptual analysis. In fact, it is completely irrelevant to the question.

The Anti-Classicism Objection is irrelevant for the same reason. If the projects listed in Sect. 1 have nothing to do with concepts, as I have claimed, then it does not matter to the success of any of these projects that concepts are not classical. Suppose that the concept of personal identity lacks a classical structure. How does that affect the project of trying to determine whether personal identity (itself) is, or is grounded in, psychological relations? Not a whit.

The question of whether concepts are classical is sometimes conflated with the question of whether there are informative necessary and sufficient conditions on *being F*, for a given property, *F*. Is there an objection to conceptual analysis that turns on the alleged fact that there are *properties*, not concepts, that lack informative analyses into necessary and sufficient conditions? I will return to this question in Sect. 2.2.2. For now, I want to emphasize that this question is *different* from the question raised, and answered in the negative, by the Anti-Classicism Objection. This latter question concerns concepts. The former does not. One way to see this is to note, as I did above, that the usual reasons given for endorsing the Anti-Classicism Objection are based on results in psychology (more on these shortly). But psychology is not in the business of describing the conditions, or lack thereof, on *non*-psychological phenomena such as knowledge, freedom, etc. This is not because knowledge, freedom, etc. are philosophical subject matters, but rather because they are non-psychological subject matters. Psychological results might tell us something about the *concept* of water, for example, but they are irrelevant to the question of what *water* is—of what the conditions on *being water* are. For the same reason, psychological results have no bearing on what knowledge, freedom, etc. are.

The Anti-Classicism Objection also assumes that conceptual analysts seek *full* classical analyses—a complete set of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions on the application of the concepts they target. This is doubly wrong, first because it makes the Concept Assumption, but second because there are plenty of instances of conceptual analysis that do not seek full analyses. None of the counterexamplifying uses of conceptual analysis have this goal, for example. More generally, there is nothing to prevent conceptual analysts from seeking just a necessary condition on their analysandum, or just an informative sufficient condition. As I will show in later sections, this false assumption of fullness—that conceptual analysts seek full analyses—is a flaw of several other skeptical objections too.

I have mentioned that results in psychology, which I have yet to describe, are thought to support the Anti-Classicism Objection. In some skeptics' thinking, these results lend independent support to skepticism about conceptual analysis. In fact, it is fair to say that some skeptics about conceptual analysis regard the psychological study of concepts as having provided empirical proof that conceptual analysis is a

wholly bankrupt methodology.<sup>14</sup> The main result alleged to constitute this proof is the discovery of *typicality effects* in people's classification behavior: roughly, people tend to judge more quickly that  $x$  is  $F$ , when  $x$  is a typical example of an  $F$  than when  $x$  is an atypical  $F$ .<sup>15</sup> I will return in a moment to the question of how typicality effects, specifically, are supposed to undermine conceptual analysis. First, I want to identify a presupposition of the view that such results *could* undermine conceptual analysis. This presupposition is that concepts, whatever else they may be, are *mental representations that guide people's actual classification behavior*. This is why typicality effects relative to such behavior are thought to reveal something about concepts: they reveal something about the mental representations guiding classification behavior.

One thought behind what I will call the *Psychology Objection* to conceptual analysis is simply that *conceptual analysts are poorly placed to be making generalizations about the mental representations that guide people's actual classification behavior*. Conceptual analysts don't conduct empirical studies, for example. They just sit around—in armchairs, according to legend—thinking. How could this procedure yield even halfway plausible generalizations about the basis of people's classification behavior? It would be deeply anti-scientific to think it could. Generalizations about the classificatory behavior of human beings require scientific backing.

But now consider, again, the projects described in Sect. 1. Even if you don't (yet) accept that these projects are not analyses of concepts, it ought to be plain that they are not, and are not intended to be, analyses of the mental representations that guide people's actual classification behavior. The philosophers engaged in these projects show very little interest in empirical questions concerning how people actually classify things, and it is implausible to suppose that they hold, even implicitly, the patently false view that they can conduct studies of behavioral psychology from the comfort of their armchairs. Conceptual analysts might be overly optimistic about their method, but they are not crazy. Even they know that generalizations about the basis of the classificatory habits of human beings require scientific verification. So, even if it were correct (which it is not) to claim that conceptual analysts target concepts, the Psychology Objection seems off track. Conceptual analysts, as represented by those engaged in the projects described in Sect. 1, are not even interested in questions of human classification behavior, let alone in speculating from the armchair about the explanatory basis of this behavior.

The metaphysician interested in determining whether omissions can be causes, for example, is not interested in how people classify things, including how and which sorts of things people classify as causes. Perhaps people do this—to return, now, to the significance of the discovery of typicality effects—by comparing the events they seek to classify with *prototypical* causes. Many psychologists take the discovery of typicality effects to show that concepts are *prototypes* or *exemplars*: representations of features that are statistically common, or taken to be, in instances of the relevant kind or category. This would explain why people are quicker to judge that apples, as opposed to tomatoes, are fruit, for example. And perhaps it can explain certain patterns

<sup>14</sup> Including, e.g., William Ramsey (1992).

<sup>15</sup> The discovery of typicality effects is due to Eleanor Rosch and her colleagues. (See Rosch 1973, 1978, and Rosch and Mervis 1975.)

in people's judgments about causation too. But, *prima facie*, people's *judgments* about causation have nothing to do with what causation *is*, nor with whether omissions can be causes. In fact, given that people are prone to all sorts of errors when they classify things, it is, on the face of it, a terrible methodological decision to turn to people's classificatory behavior regarding omissions and causes when seeking to uncover truths about omissions and causes. Omissions can be causes, or can fail to be, even if very few people *say* so, after all. The same goes for tomatoes and fruit, obviously: tomatoes can be (and are) fruit, despite the existence of plenty of people who would deny it.

In full, what I am calling the Psychology Objection to conceptual analysis is that *concepts are mental representations of the prototype or exemplar kind, as demonstrated by the existence of typicality effects, and thus are not representations of necessary and sufficient conditions on membership in the relevant category*. So far, my reply to the Psychology Objection has been that it takes conceptual analysis to be the analysis of mental representations of a certain kind. I think this is clearly a mistake, once we have examples of conceptual analysis before us. None of the projects from Sect. 1 are analyses of mental representations. They are, instead, analyses of philosophical phenomena. Does the Psychology Objection show, at least, that concepts are not classical and thus that there is something right about the Anti-Classicism Objection after all? A representation of the necessary and sufficient conditions on being an *F* might not represent what *typical F's* are like. So, perhaps, typicality effects are some evidence against Classicism. However, from the perspective of someone wishing to defend conceptual analysis from the Psychology Objection, the resolution of this debate is irrelevant. Prototype theory and Classicism are theories of *concepts*. But the Concept Assumption is false; conceptual analysis is not the analysis of concepts. So, the correct theory of concepts is immaterial to the viability and fruitfulness of conceptual analysis.

Some philosophers have reacted to psychological theorizing about concepts by claiming that concepts, as psychologists understand them, are utterly different from what philosophers take concepts to be. Philosophers take concepts to be *the meanings of terms*, not any variety of mental representation—or so it is sometimes said.<sup>16</sup> It is worth emphasizing that this issue, too, is completely irrelevant to the viability of conceptual analysis, if, as I have been urging, conceptual analysis is the analysis of philosophical phenomena, not concepts. The defense of conceptual analysis I am recommending does not require that we take concepts to be the meanings of terms as opposed to mental representations. It claims, instead, that the answer to the question of what concepts are, and whether it is the philosophers or instead the psychologists who answer correctly, has no bearing at all on what conceptual analysis is, or whether there are, or could be, any successful examples of the practice. We know what conceptual analysis is by collecting together examples of the practice, as I have done in Sect. 1, and we know, by examining this collection, that no theory of concepts, not even the correct such theory, has any bearing on the prospects for any of the projects in this collection.

<sup>16</sup> This contrast between philosophers' and psychologists' understanding of concepts is a theme of Machery (2009), Johnston and Leslie (2012), and Löhr (2018). For an argument that, even as an account of the mental representations that guide categorization, no extant psychological theory of concepts comes close to being correct, see Fodor (1998).

### 2.1.2 The naturalism objection

Some skeptics about conceptual analysis think it is at odds with the view that, methodologically speaking, philosophy should model itself on the sciences and so seek synthetic knowledge via a posteriori means. This view, a version of “philosophical naturalism”, makes conceptual analysis suspect, if the claims yielded by conceptual analysis are supposed to be analytic, a priori, or both.<sup>17</sup>

There are serious questions about whether hostility to analyticity and the a priori is justified, and whether it is justified, in particular, by the view that philosophy should model itself on the sciences. But I propose to put these questions to the side and assume that if conceptual analysis is after analytic or a priori truths, then that is sufficient reason for skepticism about the practice. Why think, though, that conceptual analysts are after analytic or a priori truths? According to what I will call the *Naturalism Objection*, this is because *conceptual analysts proceed by introspection of, and reflection on, concepts, and this procedure will not yield claims expressing genuinely synthetic or a posteriori knowledge*. In effect, the Naturalism Objection is that “armchair philosophy” can, at best, deliver only knowledge of concepts—of their content and structure—no knowledge about the nonconceptual world.

A central flaw of the Naturalism Objection is that it is not at all straightforward that conceptual analysts trade only in claims that are analytic and/or a priori. David Papineau (2009, 2014), himself a naturalist skeptic about conceptual analysis, makes a plausible case for the view that many philosophical claims are, like many scientific claims, synthetic and a posteriori. In fact, Papineau’s view is that *all* of the claims of “theoretical philosophy” (including metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of language) are akin to scientific claims in failing to be analytic or a priori. I will sketch Papineau’s reasons in a moment, but suppose, for now, that Papineau is right. Then, so long as conceptual analysis yields claims of theoretical philosophy, the Naturalism Objection fails to touch it. These claims, for Papineau’s reasons, are neither analytic nor a priori known, so hostility to conceptual analysis on the grounds that it yields claims that are allegedly analytic and a priori is simply misplaced: conceptual analysis does not deliver the relevant kinds of claims.

This defense of conceptual analysis against the Naturalism Objection is bolstered by considering, once again, the projects described in Sect. 1. None of these projects require that the claims made in undertaking them are analytic or a priori. It is no part of metasemantic theorizing to insist that it is analytically true or a priori that names, for example, refer one way as opposed to another. On the contrary, conclusions about the metasemantics of names are based, at least in part, on how names *actually* function—a synthetic matter, surely, and known only in virtue of experiences of and with the actual functioning of names. This is not peculiar to metasemantics. Take traditional epistemology, with its emphasis on the conceptual analysis of knowledge. This project starts with *examples* of knowledge and asks whether certain other (and perhaps merely hypothetical) cases are also (or would be) cases of knowledge. But this starting point—that, say, people know things via perception or inference, and thus

<sup>17</sup> Naturalist skeptics about conceptual analysis include Papineau (1993, 2009, 2014), Devitt (1996, 2014), and Kornblith (1998, 2002).

that there are actual cases of perceptual and inferential knowledge—is neither analytic nor a priori. Some of our knowledge about knowledge, and so some of the inputs to epistemological conceptual analysis, are of clearly synthetic, a posteriori claims about who knows what—and how.

Papineau explains the synthetic, a posteriori nature of theoretical philosophy by appeal to something he describes as “everyday lore”: the “understanding of the world” that “[a]ll of us, philosophers included, absorb... automatically and uncritically as we grow up” (Papineau, 2014, p. 168). There is little reason to think that much or even any of this everyday lore is analytic or a priori, or that we don’t bring it along with us when settling into the philosophical armchair. But the function of (theoretical) philosophy, according to Papineau, is to subject this everyday lore to scrutiny and either reabsorb or jettison parts of it, depending on where the philosophical arguments lead. Novel philosophical discoveries are perfectly possible on this picture, since everyday lore about philosophically significant phenomena can, for example, serve as background with respect to a thought experiment, or can be assumed in inferences to important new truths, including truths to the effect that some parts of everyday lore must be jettisoned.

I like Papineau’s picture but do not take it to be incompatible with the thought that conceptual analysis is a viable and fruitful method of philosophy. Indeed, as I have presented it here, Papineau’s picture helps explain why the Naturalism Objection is a bad argument for skepticism about conceptual analysis. Why, then, does Papineau count himself a naturalist skeptic about the practice? Because he too labors under the false Concept Assumption, the assumption that conceptual analysis is the analysis of concepts. For example, Papineau would agree with the Naturalism Objection in the claim that conceptual analysis, properly so-called, proceeds by introspection of, and reflection on, *concepts* and that this will not yield any naturalistically credentialed claims.

But the cost of insisting that conceptual analysis is the analysis of concepts is that there is then very little in at least contemporary analytic philosophy that qualifies as conceptual analysis. I think this is inconsistent with the way “conceptual analysis” is used, since it is used, for example, to refer to the diverse projects of Sect. 1. But it also raises the question of why there should be such a fuss over conceptual analysis in the first place: Why think that skepticism about conceptual analysis is the significant metaphilosophical truth skeptics take it to be, if only a small minority of philosophers actually use the method? The more plausible stance is the one taken here: conceptual analysis is a widely used method of philosophy, a method misnomerically referred to by “conceptual analysis”, but this method, having nothing to do with concepts, is not susceptible to the many objections, including the Naturalism Objection, that take it to have everything to do with concepts.

### 2.1.3 The revisionism/engineering objection

One thing that seems clear from inspection of the projects from Sect. 1 is that they are all projects of *descriptive* analysis. The aim, in each case, is to say what something

is or is not, not what it *ought* or ought not to be.<sup>18</sup> The idea behind another skeptical objection to conceptual analysis that I will consider, an objection I will call the *Revisionism/Engineering Objection*, is that it is *this* aspect of conceptual analysis—the fact that such analyses are descriptive analyses—that justifies skepticism about the practice. Roughly put, proponents of the Revisionism/Engineering Objection to conceptual analysis think that *philosophers should be engaged in normative or revisionist analyses instead*. According to these skeptics, descriptive conceptual analysis is, at best, of limited value. In fact, according to some of these skeptics, purely descriptive conceptual analysis is not even genuinely possible.

I will soon turn to the issue of *why* some proponents of the Revisionism/Engineering Objection regard descriptive conceptual analysis as of limited value and perhaps not even genuinely possible. First notice that as I have so far characterized it, the Revisionism/Engineering Objection says that descriptive conceptual analysis ought to be replaced with *something else*, something I have called *revisionist* or *normative* analysis. Many of those engaged in such analyses, also called projects of “conceptual engineering”, “conceptual ethics”, or “ameliorative analysis”, take themselves to be targeting philosophical *concepts*, but asking normative as opposed to descriptive questions about these concepts.<sup>19</sup> Revisionist analysts ask questions like, “what concepts of knowledge, freedom, morality, etc. *should* we have and use?”, as opposed to questions like, “what concepts of knowledge, freedom, morality, etc. *do we in fact* have and use?”

But, if proponents of the Revisionist/Engineering Objection agree with this characterization of revisionist analysis, and their objection therefore amounts to the objection that conceptual analysts, by asking descriptive as opposed to normative questions about concepts, are asking the *wrong* questions about concepts, then my reply, once again, is that conceptual analysts are not asking questions, normative *or* descriptive, *about concepts* at all. No skeptical objection that depends on the Concept Assumption, as this understanding of the Revisionist/Engineering Objection does, justifies skepticism about conceptual analysis.

Take the example of consequentialism as a conceptual analysis of moral rightness, briefly described in Sect. 1. On the picture I have been painting, consequentialism is an analysis of the phenomenon of moral rightness. It is *silent*—it says nothing at all—about any concept, including the concept of moral rightness. So, no objection to the consequentialist conceptual analysis of moral rightness that accuses it of asking the wrong question about the *concept* of moral rightness, as the Revisionism/Engineering Objection appears to, is going to succeed. The consequentialist analysis does not concern concepts; it does not ask or answer any question, normative or descriptive, about concepts, not even the concept of moral rightness.

<sup>18</sup> I should note here, however, that some proponents of revisionist philosophy think that much traditional philosophy, including traditional conceptual analysis, is already revisionist and fully normative in its aims and claims. Cappelen (2018) flirts with this idea and Richard (2020) endorses it outright.

<sup>19</sup> I do not mean that conceptual engineers target concepts in particular or exclusively. Many, in fact, would probably follow Cappelen in describing their targets as “representational devices”, understood to include concepts, perhaps, but also linguistic terms and their meanings. I think that most of what I say here about the Revisionism/Engineering Objection applies, even when this nuance is taken into account. The concept-free conceptual analysis I am defending is also “representation-free”. That is, conceptual analysts, on my picture, target philosophical phenomena, not concepts, words, or linguistic meanings.

Consider one of Matti Eklund's (2014) motivations for pursuing revisionist analysis (which he calls "conceptual engineering")<sup>20</sup>:

...while philosophers often have been concerned with our actual concepts or the properties or relations they stand for, philosophers should also be asking themselves whether these really are the best tools for understanding the relevant aspects of reality, and in many cases consider what preferable replacements might be. Philosophers should be engaged in *conceptual engineering*. Compare: when physicists study reality they do not hold on to the concepts of folk physics but use concepts better suited to their theoretical purposes. Why should things stand differently with what philosophers study? (Eklund 2014, p. 293)

Although Eklund is not fully skeptical of descriptive analysis in this passage, one can imagine a more impatient motivation that is: Why should philosophers attempt descriptive analyses of our "folk" philosophical concepts *at all*? Just as the important questions of theoretical physics will leave behind the concepts of folk physics, the important questions of epistemology or metaphysics will abandon folk concepts of knowledge or freedom entirely and invent new concepts better suited to serious, sophisticated investigation of these domains. This, now, is a version of the Revisionism/Engineering Objection to descriptive analyses of concepts, the objection being that there is little or no *value* to such analyses. We should always instead be engaged in revisionist analysis, asking what concepts we *should* be employing in our mature philosophical theorizing.

The problem with this Eklund-inspired version of the objection is that it clearly depends on the Concept Assumption. It takes the targets of descriptive analysis to be our "folk" (or "actual"?) concepts. But conceptual analysis is not the analysis of concepts. And descriptive conceptual analysis is not the descriptive analysis of concepts either. Conceptual analysts attempting to descriptively analyze knowledge or freedom are not interested in, and have no commitment to, any claim about concepts of any kind, including "folk" concepts of knowledge and freedom. Of course, it may be that sophisticated philosophical theorizing in epistemology and metaphysics will need to appeal to phenomena *other* than knowledge and freedom, and we will need terms to refer to these other phenomena. But this hardly shows that there is some deep problem with attempting to descriptively analyze knowledge and freedom, or that this attempt has something intimately to do with concepts.

But now consider a somewhat different motivation for revisionist analysis, this one due to Mark Richard (2014). Richard argues that there is no determinate fact of the matter about the correct descriptive analysis of free action:

Some philosophers tell us that to act freely would be to perform an act, the performance of which was not determined by conditions over which one has no control. Others tell us that to act freely is, roughly put, to perform an act such that one could have decided not to perform it (and would not have performed it, had one so decided). Yet other accounts are on offer... Why should we think that when we use the phrase 'free action' in speech or token it in thought, it is determinate that we are picking out the property isolated by one as opposed to

<sup>20</sup> Related motivations for conceptual engineering can be found in Eklund (2015).

another of these candidate analyses of free action?...it is not at all implausible that ‘free action’ does not determinately denote. (Richard 2014, p. 8)

Richard goes on to claim that this same indeterminacy affects a great many projects of purely descriptive analysis in philosophy. Often, *the* correct analysis simply will not present itself. Instead, several analyses, all with equal claim to be the correct one, will emerge. In such a case, Richard says, our only option is to choose whichever analysis is best suited to our theoretical purposes. But this procedure is revisionist: the aim is to answer the question of which analysis we *should* adopt, given our purposes, even when there is no fact of the matter about which is descriptively correct. I take this to be another version of the Revisionism/Engineering Objection to descriptive analysis, but, unlike the Eklund-inspired version, this Richard-inspired version does *not* seem to depend on the Concept Assumption. The objection is that, in many cases, arriving at the determinately correct descriptive analysis, even if we (rightly, on my view)) regard these as analyses of phenomena, not concepts, is impossible, and so the only option is revisionism. Before replying to this Richard-inspired version of the Revisionism/Engineering Objection, let me introduce a last version, this one inspired by ideas due to Cappelen (2018).

Cappelen is well aware that some philosophical methodologists (he cites Williamson (2007) and Kornblith (2002)) reject the view that the subject matter of philosophy is concepts. But Cappelen thinks that revisionist skepticism about *all* descriptive philosophy, whether its subject matter is concepts or philosophical phenomena, is nonetheless justified. He gives an argument for this that he calls the “Anti-Descriptive Argument”:

If your aim is to think about and understand some important philosophical phenomenon – say, knowledge, causation, or freedom – you have to figure out how best to think and talk about those phenomena. The best way to talk and think about, say, freedom, isn’t just to think and say true things about freedom. It is also, and just as importantly, to figure out how to represent freedom in language and thought...we have reason to think that our current way of representing freedom is defective, and so before we start trying to figure out truths about freedom we need to find out how best to represent it. This kind of inquiry is essentially a normative enterprise. It asks how best to represent those phenomena and what might be defective about current ways of representing them. The assessment and improvement of concepts is at the core of philosophical practice, no matter what the topic. Your goal *cannot* be purely descriptive if you accept [that many philosophical concepts are defective and need improvement] – at the core of all philosophical activity is the continuous assessment of representational devices. (Cappelen 2018, pp. 47–48)

Cappelen’s Anti-Descriptive Argument can be viewed as another, and perhaps the most radical, version of the Revisionism/Engineering Objection to conceptual analysis, since if it is an argument against descriptive philosophy generally, as Cappelen bills it, then it is an argument against (descriptive) conceptual analysis. Like the Richard-inspired version, this Cappelen-inspired version does not appear to depend on the Concept Assumption. In fact, Cappelen is explicit that he thinks his argument succeeds

against descriptive philosophy, and so, presumably, against conceptual analysis, even if we regard the targets of these analyses as philosophical phenomena, not concepts.

What is interesting about both the Richard and Cappelen-inspired versions of the Revisionism/Engineering Objection is that, while they do not depend on the Concept Assumption, they do depend on claims about concepts.<sup>21</sup> On the Richard version, it is the claim that it is indeterminate, in many cases, what our philosophical concepts denote. On the Cappelen version, it is the claim that our philosophical concepts are, or are likely, *defective* in various ways (including, perhaps, denoting indeterminately, in the sense Richard articulates), ways that prevent us from using them to simply “think and say true things” about their denotations. However, Richard’s claim about our philosophical concepts is doubtful, and Cappelen’s claim about these concepts, even if true, does not justify blanket skepticism about conceptual analysis.

One reason to doubt Richard’s claim is that it appears to be based on an equivocal use of “determinately denotes”. The fact that some philosophers propose one analysis of free action, while others propose a different one, is, at best, grounds for claiming that we do not *know* which, if either, of these analyses is correct, and thus that there is a sense in which we do not know which phenomenon is the phenomenon denoted by “free action”. But, firstly, this ignorance, if genuine, simply does not imply that there is no fact of the matter about which of the two candidate phenomena is denoted by “free action”.<sup>22</sup> Epistemological indeterminacy is not metaphysical indeterminacy. But, secondly, Richard’s example of course does not show that “free action” fails to determinately denote all and only those actions that are *free actions*. So, Richard’s example offers no reason whatsoever for thinking that our philosophical concepts, quite generally, fail to determinately denote, and thus that the only question to be asked is which phenomena we *should* be using them to denote, given our theoretical purposes. On the contrary, since “knowledge” determinately denotes knowledge, and “moral rightness” moral rightness, etc., there is no obvious bar to trying to descriptively analyze these (determinately denoted) phenomena.

What about the Cappelen-inspired version of the Revisionism/Engineering Objection? The problem with Cappelen’s version is that most of the conceptual defects Cappelen describes are not *severe* enough to prevent us from using our philosophical concepts “just to think and say” true things about the phenomena they denote.

A full catalog of the many conceptual defects Cappelen regards as preventing descriptive conceptual analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. But one merits special attention: *meaninglessness*. According to Cappelen, a defect of at least some of our philosophical concepts is that they are literally meaningless. To use them in thought and talk is to speak and think *nonsense*. Unfortunately, it is also beyond the

<sup>21</sup> Cappelen (2018) claims that, ultimately, his Anti-Descriptive Argument, and his entire book on conceptual engineering, is not really about concepts at all, but instead about the *intensions of terms*. Naturally, I am sympathetic with the view that, like “conceptual analysis”, “conceptual engineering”, too, might be a misnomer. But suppose that concepts just *are* the intensions of terms, as some philosophers take them to be. Then, the Anti-Descriptive Argument, and Cappelen’s book as a whole, is about concepts after all.

<sup>22</sup> I do not mean to mislead readers by switching from talk of the denotation of a concept to talk of the denotation of a term. Rather, I mean to be speaking somewhat loosely of the “representational devices” we employ in thinking and speaking of free action. (See note 19 for a related point.) My claim is that Richard equivocates on “determinately denotes”, regardless of whether it’s conceptual or linguistic denotation that is at issue.

scope of this paper to give Cappelen's *argument* for the view that some of our philosophical concepts are meaningless.<sup>23</sup> However, independently of the details of this argument, it is implausible to think that *all*, or even very many, of our philosophical concepts are literally meaningless. Perhaps a few are, but not even the positivists held that each and every of our philosophical concepts, and so, presumably, philosophy as a whole, is meaningless. But if most of our philosophical concepts are *not* meaningless, then we ought to be able to use them to think and say true things about what these concepts denote, whatever other defects they may have.

Indeed, *that* they denote is as non-defective as they need to be in order to for us to be able use them to think and say true things about their denotations. Suppose, for example, that our concept of freedom is *vague*, in the way a great many of our concepts, philosophical and non, are vague. (Vagueness is on Cappelen's list of possible conceptual defects.) Presumably, the vagueness of the concept of greenness does not prevent us from using it to say true things about green things. So, similarly, with the concept of freedom: even if it is vague, and even if it is perhaps defective in various other ways too, so long as it is not flat-out meaningless, then it seems that we can use it to say and think true things about freedom. In particular, it seems we can use it to think and talk about that which the conceptual analysts among us might wish to descriptively analyze: freedom.

To sum up, some versions of the Revisionism/Engineering Objection depend on the Concept Assumption and should be rejected on this basis. Some versions, like Richard's and Cappelen's, do not depend on the Concept Assumption, but do depend on certain other dubious claims about concepts. Hence, these versions, too, fail to justify skepticism about descriptive conceptual analysis.

## 2.2 Skeptical objections not based on the concept assumption

### 2.2.1 The intuitions/Xphi objection

In my earlier discussion of the Psychology Objection, in Sect. 2.1.1, I claimed that the way people actually classify things is irrelevant to whether, for example, omissions can be causes, or personal identity is grounded in psychological relations. Some philosophical methodologists will deny this, however. They think people's classificatory behavior provides *evidence* bearing on the truth of philosophical claims.

Usually this idea is dressed up in talk of "intuitions": philosophy treats intuitions as evidence for claims about causation, knowledge, personal identity, etc. On its own, this claim about the role of intuitions in philosophy is neutral regarding conceptual analysis. Indeed, some defenders of conceptual analysis (Jackson (1998)) think that treating intuitions as evidence is the central activity of conceptual analysis. That is *how* one analyzes a concept, they would say: one "elicits" intuitions about what does and does not belong in the concept's extension.

Recently, however, philosophers working under the banner of "experimental philosophy" ("xphi") have produced reasons for doubt about the reliability of specifically philosophical intuitions: such intuitions are sensitive to factors such as cultural back-

<sup>23</sup> See Cappelen 2013 for an argument to this effect.

ground or presentation order of presented “cases”.<sup>24</sup> If xphi results to this effect are genuine and pervasive, then it hardly seems acceptable for philosophers to continue to rely on intuitions as evidence for conceptual analyses.

This amounts to an objection to conceptual analysis that can be expressed as follows. *Since conceptual analyses proceed on the basis of evidential appeals to intuitions about cases, and since there are reasons (stemming from xphi, for example) to think that these intuitions should not be trusted, the main supposed evidence for conceptual analysis—intuition—is undermined, and conceptual analysis is thereby undermined as well.* Call this the *Intuitions/Xphi Objection*.

Unlike the objections discussed in the last section, the Intuitions/Xphi Objection does not *depend* on the Concept Assumption (though some proponents of the objection no doubt make the assumption anyway). If intuitions are treated as evidence for conceptual analyses, and xphi shows that this evidence is suspect, then that is sufficient reason for skepticism about conceptual analysis, even if conceptual analyses target philosophical phenomena, not concepts, as I maintain.

However, the Intuitions/Xphi Objection *does* assume that conceptual analysts treat intuitions as evidence, and *this* assumption is (also) false, as I argue in Deutsch (2015). For example, none of the projects from Sect. 1 involve evidential appeals to intuitions. Since they are all, paradigmatically, projects of conceptual analysis, we can conclude that such appeals are absent from conceptual analyses, generally speaking.

Arguably, not even Gettier’s (1963) attack on the JTB theory involves evidential appeals to intuitions. This is significant because Gettier’s attack on the JTB theory is often taken, by fans of xphi, and in more traditional metaphilosophy as well, as a prime example of philosophy’s reliance on intuition. But Gettier did not claim simply that our intuitions conflict with the JTB theory. Rather, he *argued* that his counterexamples are genuine. In my 2015 book, I claim that Gettier explicitly appeals to an “anti-luck” principle in this argument, one that says, roughly, that no luckily true beliefs qualify as instances of knowledge. If some such principle is true, as I take Gettier to assert, then we have a *reason*—not just an intuition—for taking Gettier’s cases to be cases of justified true belief without knowledge. The cases are cases of *luckily* true justified belief, and therefore, given the anti-luck principle, are not cases of knowledge. The brevity of Gettier 1963 contributes to the impression that Gettier intends it to be “just intuitive” that his cases are counterexamples to the JTB theory. But, in fact, on second look, Gettier offers a principled argument for this conclusion.

I lack the space to fully make the argument that all of the projects from Sect. 1 are similarly free of evidential appeals to intuitions. I will say, however, that that this fuller argument for the view that conceptual analysis is free of these kinds of appeals is essentially the same argument that Deutsch (2015) and Cappelen (2012) have made for the view that philosophy, generally, does not rely on intuitions as evidence. I have mentioned my take, in earlier work, on Gettier versus the JTB theory. But Cappelen and I present many other case studies of philosophical practice, case studies which, again and again, fail to turn up any evidential appeals to intuition.

Many, if not all, of the instances of philosophy that Cappelen and I examine are themselves instances of conceptual analysis; there is considerable overlap between the

<sup>24</sup> For some of the early results, see Weinberg et al. (2001) and Machery et al. (2004).

projects described in Sect. 1 and the projects Cappelen and I cover in our case studies. In other words, the reasons for supposing philosophy not to involve evidential appeals to intuitions carry over directly as reasons for supposing that conceptual analysis does not involve such appeals either.

Despite this, Cappelen evinces skepticism about conceptual analysis, writing that “[r]ecognition of the marginal (or non-existent) role of intuitions in philosophical practice goes hand in hand with recognition of the marginal (or non-existent) role of anything reasonably labeled ‘conceptual analysis’ in philosophy” (Cappelen 2012, p. 206). But here I differ from Cappelen: these recognitions do *not* go hand in hand. Misnomers might not *reasonably* label things. Still, most misnomers label things; they are not empty terms. I have been arguing that there is good reason to think that “conceptual analysis” is a misnomer but that it nevertheless refers to a large range of viable and fruitful philosophical projects, including those I described in Sect. 1, but also many of those Cappelen takes as case studies. Even if Cappelen is right, as I think he is, to reject the view that there is widespread reliance on intuition in philosophy, he is wrong, I think, to infer from this that conceptual analysis plays only a “marginal (or non-existent)” role in philosophy. *Conceptual analysis* can play a significant role in philosophy without *concepts* or *intuitions* playing any role at all, if “conceptual analysis” misnomerically refers to viable and fruitful philosophical projects that appeal to neither concepts nor intuitions. Cappelen’s mistake, one he shares with just about every other philosophical methodologist, is in thinking that the Concept Assumption is true, and hence that “conceptual analysis” must refer to something involving concepts and intuitions, if it refers to anything. But, if I am right, the Concept Assumption is false, and “conceptual analysis” refers to something involving neither.<sup>25</sup>

### 2.2.2 The bad track-record and unanalyzability objections

Perhaps the most common objection to conceptual analysis is that it simply does not work: the history of attempts at conceptual analysis is a history of total failure. According to what I will call the Bad Track-Record Objection, *if conceptual analysis were a viable and fruitful method of philosophy, there would be at least some successful examples. But there are none. Hence, conceptual analysis is hopeless, and no one should bother trying to conceptually analyze anything.*<sup>26</sup>

As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, the Bad Track-Record Objection, like the Intuitions/Xphi objection, does not depend on the Concept Assumption. Propo-

<sup>25</sup> Why not take “intuition-based philosophy” and similar labels to misnomerically refer to philosophical practices and projects that are not based on intuitions? Because, typically, the users of such labels intend something fairly specific by the term “intuition”. Intuitions are non-inferential judgments, or they are “seemings” or “presentations” of a special phenomenological kind. (See, e.g., Bengson 2015 and Chudnoff 2013.) By contrast, I suspect that the use of “conceptual analysis” is not typically accompanied by specific intentions concerning concepts and their role. “Conceptual analysis” is just a catch-all expression for that kind of philosophy instantiated by the diverse projects listed in Sect. 1. (Cappelen (2018) makes a similar claim about “conceptual engineering”.) Having said that, my view is that methodologists do quite often refer, in claims like “*this* [demonstrating some argumentative move] is an appeal to an intuition”, to things that are not appeals to intuitions.

<sup>26</sup> The Bad Track-Record Objection is made by Stich (1992), Machery (2009), Huemer (2015), and Nado (2019), among others. A main aim of Weatherson (2003) is to overcome the Bad Track-Record Objection.

nents of the objection can insist on conceptual analysis's total failure without insisting that attempted analyses are attempted analyses of concepts. However, the question for the Bad Track-Record Objection is: Why should the rest of us agree with its dismal assessment of conceptual analysis's track-record? Here is part of my own, far less pessimistic assessment: Gettier showed that the JTB theory is false, Kripke showed that the causal theory is superior to descriptivism, Frankfurt demonstrated that moral responsibility does not require the ability to do otherwise, there are clear counterexamples to consequentialism, personal identity is not grounded in psychological relations, and some omissions are paradigmatically causes. These are all conclusions wrought via conceptual analysis, so, from my perspective, conceptual analysis is doing just fine. It is delivering compelling conclusions about absolutely central philosophical issues.

Some proponents of the Bad Track-Record Objection think that conceptual analysis's track-record is hopelessly poor because, according to them, there are no successful, *full* analyses of central philosophical concepts. This links the Bad Track-Record Objection to the Anti-Classicism Objection: conceptual analysts seek, and have failed to find, full analyses, into individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions, of any philosophical concept.

Notice, though, that, as I just formulated it, this version of the Bad Track-Record Objection *does* make the Concept Assumption. The problem with conceptual analysis, on this construal of the objection, is that there are no successful, full analyses *of concepts*. Interpreted this way, my reply to the Bad Track-Record Objection is the same as my reply to the No Theory, Anti-Classicism, Psychology, and Naturalism objections: conceptual analysts do not target concepts, so no "facts" about concepts, including, let's suppose, the fact that no philosophical concept has ever been successfully fully analyzed, are relevant to whether there have been, or can be, any successful examples of full conceptual analyses.

But consider a version of the Bad Track-Record Objection that objects that there have been no successful, full conceptual analyses, period, even if conceptual analyses are analyses of philosophical phenomena, as I have been urging. Interpreted this way, is it really so obvious that the Bad Track-Record Objection says something true? That is, is it really so obvious that philosophy has not turned up a single, successful, full analysis of some or other central philosophical phenomenon? I think that the severest skepticism warranted here is that the jury is still out. Actually, my own view is that this is far *too* skeptical. For example, I am inclined to think that a causal-historical account of the metaseantics of names is a successful, full analysis of reference for names. I am also more or less convinced that an omissions-admitting, counterfactual analysis of causation is a successful, full analysis of causation. This being a paper on methodology, it is not the place to enter into the details of why I do (and why you should too) take these as successful, full analyses, but the methodological moral is clear: it is surely a matter for further debate and philosophizing *whether* they are or not. In other words, at the very least, the jury is still out on whether philosophy has successfully fully analyzed anything.

Proponents of this version of the Bad-Track Record Objection think the jury is in and that the verdict is that there are no successful, full conceptual analyses. But why? One reason is that these skeptics think that there are various specific examples

of attempts at full analysis that are, allegedly, documented failures, the usual suspect being the project pursued in the derisively so-called “Gettierology” literature, in which a full analysis of knowledge is sought. But I think the more general reason they would give for endorsing this version of the Bad Track-Record Objection is that, for each and every proposed full analysis, there is always a host of *intuitive counterexamples*. But, to engage in a bit of conceptual analysis: What is an intuitive counterexample? Can there be intuitive counterexamples that are not counterexamples? Certainly, something can *appear* or *seem* to be a counterexample, even when it is not. So, the existence of intuitive counterexamples to a full analysis, conceived as apparent or seeming counterexamples to that analysis, do not demonstrate that the analysis is unsuccessful.<sup>27</sup> Most theories, even the true ones, can *seem* false, of course. And, given the (non-)role of intuitions in philosophy (briefly characterized in Sect. 2.2), propping up the Bad Track-Record Objection by appeal to intuitions and intuitive counterexamples ought to be regarded as entirely ineffective anyway. If the Bad Track-Record Objection assigns a significant evidential role to intuition in conceptual analysis, it should, for that reason alone, be rejected.

In any case, the Bad Track-Record Objection, construed as the view that there is no successful, *full* analysis of any philosophical phenomenon, has no devastating skeptical implication unless we assume that conceptual analysts always seek full analyses. Back in Sect. 2.1, I called this the “false assumption of fullness” and complained that one flaw of the Anti-Classicism Objection is that it makes this false assumption. A clear problem for the construal of the Bad Track-Record Objection we are now considering is that it too makes this false assumption of fullness. When I earlier gave my rosier assessment of conceptual analysis’s track-record, I concentrated on the many cases in which conceptual analysis has yielded what I take to be clear counterexamples to an allegedly full analysis of some or other philosophical phenomenon. I take it that these cases are no *less* cases of conceptual analysis than are the cases in which a full analysis is proposed. Gettier, for example, was conceptually analyzing knowledge when he discovered his counterexamples to the JTB theory. More generally, the negative, counterexamining variety of conceptual analysis is exactly that: a variety of conceptual analysis. Do track-record considerations show that conceptual analysts have completely failed in the search for counterexamples to allegedly full analyses? Not only do such considerations *not* show this, but proponents of the Bad Track-Record Objection appear committed to the view that they do not. After all, their objection is that there are always counterexamples to any proposed full analysis. But how are these counterexamples *discovered*, if not via conceptual analysis?

So, even if there are no successful, full conceptual analyses, skepticism about the practice as a whole, based on track-record considerations, would appear unjustified, perhaps even self-defeating. Even absent full analyses, it is perfectly reasonable to

<sup>27</sup> A central insight of Brian Weatherson’s (2003) paper on philosophical counterexamples is that there can be good theoretical reasons to deny that *apparent* counterexamples are *genuine*, even when *everyone* strongly intuits that they are genuine. Weatherson goes so far as to argue that Gettier’s counterexamples to the JTB theory might be merely apparent. Although I disagree with him about Gettier’s cases, I could not agree more about the upshot for philosophical methodology, which I take to be that even the strongest, most widespread intuitions about cases can and should sometimes give way to a full analysis with which they conflict. Sally Haslanger (2006) can be read as making this key methodological point as well.

suppose that conceptual analysts can, and have, uncovered important necessary conditions, or interesting sufficient conditions, on central philosophical phenomena. The total set of such conditions—again, even absent any successful, full analysis of any of these phenomena—would represent a quite substantial body of genuine philosophical knowledge about the philosophical phenomena we seek to understand.

I want to turn, now, to a different, but related, skeptical objection, one to the effect that *the targets of conceptual analyses are, or are mostly, unanalyzable*. It should come as no surprise, by this point, that I take the initial plausibility of this *Unanalyzability Objection* to conceptual analysis, as I will call it, to depend heavily on just what it supposes the targets of conceptual analyses to be. If it supposes these to be *concepts*, then, for reasons that I need not repeat yet again, the objection, even if true, is irrelevant to the question of the viability and fruitfulness of conceptual analysis.

The more interesting version of the Unanalyzability Objection accepts that conceptual analyses are analyses of philosophical phenomena but claims that most of these phenomena are, well, unanalyzable. For example, Timothy Williamson (2000) argues that knowledge is unanalyzable and suggests that the traditional epistemological project of conceptually analyzing knowledge should therefore be abandoned in favor of a “knowledge-first” epistemology, one that accepts the unanalyzability of knowledge and moves on to other projects with aims and emphases quite different from traditional ones.

Of all the objections presented thus far, this version of the Unanalyzability Objection is the objection with which I have the most sympathy. I accept that some philosophical phenomena are primitive in the sense of lacking informative, full analyses into necessary and sufficient conditions.<sup>28</sup> However, as I pointed out in connection with the Anti-Classicism and Bad Track-Record objections, *full* analyses are not the only kinds of analyses conceptual analysts seek. Sometimes analysis yields merely a necessary condition, for example, or merely a sufficient condition. Gettier seems to have discovered that a necessary condition on knowledge is being non-Gettiered belief, for example. This discovery represents a philosophical advance, regardless of whether knowledge is a primitive phenomenon, and thus not *fully* analyzable, as Williamson claims, or not. Furthermore, even if some central philosophical phenomena are primitive, there will be allied phenomena analyzable in terms these primitive ones. Williamson’s argument for a knowledge-first epistemology strikes me as an argument for a shift of emphasis, rather than a shift of method. Not all epistemic features are primitive, even if knowledge is. Perhaps some of these others can be fully analyzed in terms knowledge, as Williamson himself appears to suggest, by, for example, analyzing belief and evidence in terms of knowledge.

<sup>28</sup> Here, and in my earlier discussion of the Bad Track-Record Objection, I assume that we can make sense of the idea of an analysis, or full analysis, of knowledge, freedom, etc. themselves, and that, relatedly, we can make sense of the idea that these phenomena might possess necessary and sufficient conditions on their instantiation or existence. Knowledge, for example, might be a complex phenomenon, having belief as a simpler part. If so, then knowledge can be described as partially analyzable in terms of belief. A way to understand a “full analysis” of a phenomenon, then, would be to understand it as a “breaking down” or “decomposition” of the phenomenon into its simpler parts. Thanks to an anonymous referee (this journal) for asking me to be clearer about my views about what might be involved in analyzing philosophical phenomena.

### 3 Potential worries

I have argued that conceptual analysis is the (descriptive) analysis of philosophical phenomena, not concepts, and that, once we view the practice as such, various skeptical objections raised against it can be answered. One might accept that this argument answers skeptical threats to conceptual analysis, *if I am right about what conceptual analysis is or involves*, but worry that I am *not* right about this. In this section, I offer replies to five worries of this general type. In Sect. 3.1, I reply to the worry that analyzing concepts is *unavoidably* part of analyzing phenomena. In Sect. 3.2, I reply to the worry that I use “conceptual analysis” in a way very different from the way it was intended by early pioneers of analytic philosophy. In Sect. 3.3, I reply to the worry that conceptual analysis, as I understand and defend it, is not at all what Frank Jackson (1998) has in mind in his famous defense of the practice. In Sect. 3.4, I answer an objection to the effect that, while I am right that conceptual analysis is not concept-involving in its subject matter, “conceptual analysis” is nonetheless an apt, non-misnomic label, because concepts provide us *epistemic access* to the relevant truths about philosophical phenomena. Lastly, in Sect. 3.5, I reply to the worry that my view about the misnomic nature of “conceptual analysis” trades on a merely verbal issue, one with no substantive metaphilosophical consequences.

#### 3.1 Isn't analyzing concepts unavoidable?

Suppose that “Gettiered” beliefs are not knowledge. It is then true that the term, “knowledge”, fails to apply to Gettiered beliefs, and (equivalently) that the extension of term “knowledge” has no Gettiered beliefs in it. Is it also true that the *concept* of knowledge fails to apply to Gettiered beliefs—that the concept of knowledge has no Gettiered beliefs in *its* extension? If so, then the project of challenging the JTB theory via Gettier cases, a project I take to be a clear example of conceptual analysis, looks like it does involve analyzing concepts after all: it involves or implies claims about the extension of the concept of knowledge, for example. More generally, one might complain that the view that the targets of conceptual analysis are philosophical phenomena as opposed to concepts, the view that I have been defending here, mistakenly implies that conceptual analysts can avoid all talk of concepts. But they can't: conclusions about the phenomena imply conclusions about our concepts of these phenomena. In particular, or so the objection might go, they imply conclusions about the extensions of these concepts.

The key to seeing that this worry is misplaced is to recognize that *every* claim, whether about philosophical phenomena or not, has implications concerning the extensions of the terms used in making that claim. The economist who says “Interest rates are rising”, for example, is committed to claims about the extensions of “interest rates” and “are rising”. Suppose we take concepts to be “mental analogs” of terms, sharing extensions with these terms. Then, if being committed to claims about the extensions of concepts is to (at least partially) analyze these concepts, the economist who says “Interest rates are rising” is offering (partial) analyses of the concept of interest rates and the concept of rising. Indeed, a toddler, just beginning to assert

things, who points skyward and shouts, “Airplane!” is analyzing the concept of an airplane. Certainly, the toddler’s claim, no less than the economist’s, has consequences with respect to the extension of the relevant term (that the extension of “airplane” includes the demonstrated object), and so with respect to the extension of the relevant concept-as-mental-analog-of-the-term.

I have no real objection to regarding anyone who asserts anything at all as analyzing concepts. So perhaps I should revise my positive view in the following way: conceptual analysis is the analysis of phenomena, not concepts, at least not in any sense of “analyzing concepts” *beyond* the sense in which anyone who asserts anything at all is thereby analyzing concepts. After all, both conceptual analysts *and* their skeptic critics are analyzing concepts in this thin sense of “analyzing concepts”. The question is whether there is any more substantive sense of “analyzing concepts” according to which conceptual analysis is the analysis of concepts. My arguments in Sect. 2 are arguments that there is not; conceptual analysis is the analysis of philosophical phenomena, not the analysis of concepts in any sense beyond the thin sense in which all assertions about anything are analyses of concepts. The upshot of these arguments is that “analyzing concepts” is *not* unavoidable, not in any sense of the phrase that would subject the practice to the skepticism described in Sect. 2.

### 3.2 Didn’t earlier conceptual analysts analyze concepts?

A different sort of worry about my view is that, while perhaps the more or less contemporary projects described in Sect. 1 are not analyses of concepts in any substantive sense, early philosophical analysts did analyze concepts in such a sense. Indeed, the objection might proceed, the advent of a distinctively new approach to philosophy, *analytic philosophy*, was precisely the advent of a new method whose focus was concepts.

In fact, however, this common view of analytic philosophy’s history is mistaken. Even early analytic philosophers are innocent of analyzing concepts. Take G.E. Moore, regarded by many as among the first analytic philosophers, and a figure many other early analytic philosophers, including Russell, Wittgenstein, and Austin, explicitly regarded as an important influence on their own styles of philosophizing. Moore was a conceptual analyst but, as I read him, he close to explicitly disavows the view that the targets of analysis are concepts:

A definition... often mean[s] the expressing of one word’s meaning in other words. But this is not the sort of definition I am asking for. Such a definition can never be of ultimate importance to any study except lexicography. If I wanted that kind of definition I should have to consider in the first place how people generally used the word... but my business is not with its proper usage, as established by custom. I should, indeed, be foolish if I tried to use it for something which it did not usually denote: if, for instance, I were to announce that, whenever I used the word ‘good’, I must be understood to be thinking of that object which is usually denoted by the word ‘table’. I shall, therefore, use the word in the sense in which I think it is ordinarily used; but at the same time I am not anxious to discuss whether I am right in thinking it is so used. My business is solely with

that object or idea, which I hold, rightly or wrongly, that the word is generally used to stand for. What I want to discover is the nature of that object or idea (Moore 1903, p. 6 (Section 6)).

The targets of analysis, for Moore, are those “objects or ideas” that are the *denotations* of terms like “good”. In other words, they are philosophical phenomena—goodness, e.g.,—not our concepts of these phenomena. In fact, Moore explicitly denies that he is interested the meaning of “good” or in its “proper usage”, which is an interest one might expect from someone seeking an analysis of the *concept* of goodness. Rather, he says, he is interested in a “definition”—an analysis—that sidesteps questions of meaning and proper usage and tries, as Moore himself puts it, to reveal the “nature” of goodness itself.<sup>29</sup>

Moore is just a single example of an early analytic philosopher who would not accept that analytic philosophy does or should proceed by analyzing concepts. But Moore’s example is suggestive: there is a case to be made that even early conceptual analysts, such as Moore, were not analyzing concepts and that “conceptual analysis”, although it refers to projects undertaken by these early pioneers, does so only misnomerically, in the very way in which the projects described in Sect. 1 are correctly, though misnomerically, referred to by the label.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.3 You don’t defend Jacksonian analysis: but Jacksonian analysis is conceptual analysis!

Frank Jackson (1998) defends an alleged philosophical practice in which one assembles “folk intuitions” about knowledge, say, and then identifies knowledge with whatever it is, if anything, that makes most of these intuitions turn out true. He *claims* that defending such a practice is to defend conceptual analysis but, on my view, he is wrong: arguing that Gettier cases are not cases of knowledge, for example, is to engage in conceptual analysis but, as I claimed in Sect. 2.2, arguing for this has nothing to do with assembling intuitions, let alone folk intuitions, about anything. Suppose we grant, however, that assembling folk intuitions about *x* is to analyze the folk concept of *x*. Then Jackson can be regarded as defending a practice that seeks to analyze folk concepts. But, since analyzing folk concepts is assembling folk intuitions, according to Jackson (and as we have granted), and since, according to me, it is no part of the projects in the extension of “conceptual analysis” to assemble anyone’s intuitions about anything, Jackson’s defense still fails to be a defense of conceptual analysis, properly, though misnomerically, so called.

<sup>29</sup> Penelope Maddy (2017) thus seems to me quite wide of the interpretive mark when introducing this very passage from Moore by writing that, “Moore and others had recently introduced a revolutionary new vision of philosophical method, the idea that a large part, if not all, of the philosopher’s job is the careful analysis of the content of *concepts* like ‘cause’, ‘freedom’, and in our case, ‘knowledge’” (60; my emphasis). On the contrary, Moore seems concerned to reject this vision of philosophy and replace it with a vision according to which the philosopher’s job is the careful analysis of causation, freedom, and knowledge *themselves*—the *denotations*, as Moore himself would put it, of our terms for these phenomena.

<sup>30</sup> Conceptual analysis used to be called “philosophical analysis”, which is what Scott Soames (2003a, b) labels it in his history of analytic philosophy. One wonders whether it would have acquired the bad rap it has acquired in more recent times, if the older label had stuck.

There is a version of Jacksonian analysis that drops talk of folk intuitions in favor of talk of “folk platitudes” or “folk theory”. On this version, to analyze the folk concept of  $x$ , is to assemble folk *beliefs* about “what counts” as an  $x$ , and then declare  $x$  to be whatever it is, if anything, that makes the folk platitudes/theory come out mostly true. There is a sense in which this is the more plausible version, for why think that only *intuitions* constitute the “ordinary conception” of anything? But, while this version might be a more plausible version of what it is to analyze a folk concept, it still strikes me as not recognizably part of the projects discussed in Sect. 1. None of these projects begin with attempts to delineate folk theories of the relevant phenomena.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, both versions of Jacksonian analysis are susceptible to the following clear objection, which cropped up in my earlier discussions of the Psychology and Intuitions/Xphi objections: the folk can be, and often are, *mistaken* in their beliefs about what counts as an  $x$ , for pretty much any  $x$  at all. But conceptual analysts are not attempting to catalog the possibly deeply mistaken views of the folk. Rather, they seek to say what knowledge, freedom, etc. *are*, not what anyone or any group of people *takes* it that they are.

### 3.4 Does the “conceptual” in “conceptual analysis” describe our epistemic access to, as opposed to the subject matter of, the claims made by conceptual analysts?

Some defenders of conceptual analysis think that concepts are *epistemically* relevant to the claims made by conceptual analysts even if these claims do not concern concepts as their subject matter. According to these methodologists, concepts play a crucial role in *how we know* whether the claims constituting an analysis are true. Their view has it that conceptual analyses are conceptual, not in their subject matter, but in our epistemic access to this subject matter.<sup>32</sup>

Balcerak-Jackson and Balcerak-Jackson (2012), for example, defend a view according to which merely *understanding* concepts can justify the claims that constitute a conceptual analysis. Suppose, for example, that merely by understanding the concepts involved in the claim, one can come to know that Gettier cases are not cases of knowledge. *What* one comes to know here—the subject matter of the claim that Gettier cases are not cases of knowledge—concerns knowledge itself, not the concept of knowledge, but this knowledge about knowledge itself is *arrived at* merely by understanding concepts, those concepts involved in the claim that Gettier cases are not cases of knowledge, including, of course, the concept of knowledge.

<sup>31</sup> This terminology of “folk intuitions”, “folk platitudes”, “folk theories”, beliefs about “what counts” as an  $x$ , and “ordinary conceptions” is all taken from Jackson (1998). In saying that the projects from Sect. 1 do not begin by delineating folk theories of the philosophical phenomena the projects concern, I do not mean to suggest that there are distinct kinds of knowledge, freedom, etc.: the folk kinds versus the philosophical kinds. On the contrary, I simply assume that the philosophers and the folk are speaking of the same phenomena when they use terms such as “knowledge”, “freedom”, etc.

<sup>32</sup> An earlier draft of this paper overlooked this understanding of conceptual analysis. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer (this journal) for reminding me of its relevance.

Call any view of this ilk an “epistemic view of conceptual analysis”.<sup>33</sup> One might think that if some or another epistemic view is correct, then “conceptual analysis” turns out *not* to be a misnomer. The “conceptual” in “conceptual analysis” *aptly* characterizes how we come to know whether the claims constituting an analysis are true, and so the label does not mislead us about *that*. Still, a label can fail to mislead us about one thing while misleading us about another. And it is clear, I think (witness the Concept Assumption), that “conceptual analysis” has misled many of its users into thinking that, in their subject matter, conceptual analyses are analyses of concepts. That is so whether or not an epistemic view of conceptual analysis is the correct such view. In other words, an epistemic view can be correct consistently with my claim that “conceptual analysis” is a misleading misnomer.

Do epistemic views of conceptual analysis present further worries for my own view of the practice? Some epistemic views tie conceptual understanding and related notions, such as “conceptual competence”, to intuitions, and the view that intuitions about cases are evidence for or against conceptual analyses. I would reject these versions for reasons I described in my discussion of Jacksonian analysis in the previous Sect. (3.3) and in my earlier discussion of the Intuitions/Xphi Objection (2.2.1). But a link between an epistemic view and an intuitions-as-evidence methodology for conceptual analysis seems optional, not something definitive of an epistemic view of the practice.

I am not opposed, myself, to the idea that at least *some* of the claims wrought via conceptual analysis might be, for example, “epistemically analytic” in Boghossian’s (1997) sense. And the notion of epistemic analyticity provides at least one way of explaining how mere conceptual understanding or competence could be a route to knowledge of the truth of a claim made in the course of a conceptual analysis.<sup>34</sup> I doubt that very *many* of the claims made by conceptual analysts are epistemically analytic or knowable solely via the exercise of conceptual understanding (and some of these claims—for example, those regarding the metasemantics of our terms—do not seem even to be good *candidates* for epistemic analyticities) but I have no objection in principle to there being something epistemically special about at least some of the claims made by conceptual analysts. From my perspective, the main problem with an epistemic view of conceptual analysis is that such views will likely fail to categorize all of the many philosophical projects that truly are conceptual analyses as conceptual analyses. On my view, all of the projects from Sect. 1, along with an enormous number of similar projects in philosophy, are projects of conceptual analysis. But it strikes me as implausible that the claims that constitute these analyses are, one and all, knowably true or false on the basis of mere conceptual understanding alone.

<sup>33</sup> Another proponent of an epistemic view of conceptual analysis is Horvath (2018). Chalmers’s (2012) arguments for various “scrutability theses” can be viewed as arguments for an epistemic view of conceptual analysis as well.

<sup>34</sup> Boghossian (1997) is thus an important precursor to later, fuller developments of epistemic views of conceptual analysis. Balcerak-Jackson and Balcerak-Jackson (2012) develops and elaborates an epistemic view based on Boghossian’s ideas about epistemic analyticity, and defends epistemic analyticity against Williamson’s (2007) attack on the notion.

### 3.5 Isn't this a merely verbal issue?

I can imagine someone objecting to my defense of conceptual analysis by claiming that it trades on a *merely verbal issue*. In particular, it might be noted, my defense is based on the claim that the extension of “conceptual analysis” includes the projects described in Sect. 1. But one might think that *whether* this is true is simply, and not interestingly, a matter of how we choose to use the label. If we choose to use “conceptual analysis” as a label for the projects described in Sect. 1, then perhaps I am right that conceptual analysis is immune to various skeptical objections (assuming I am right that the relevant projects do not target concepts). But if we instead choose to use “conceptual analysis” such that nothing that fails to be an analysis of a concept is in its extension, then many of the objections laid out in Sect. 2 are, in fact, quite plausible grounds for skepticism about conceptual analysis. At bottom, however, this is verbal issue; it is a matter of how we choose to use a particular expression. Nothing of substance hangs on it.

Furthermore, the objection might continue, most philosophers and philosophical methodologists choose to use “conceptual analysis” such that it refers to analyses of concepts (and might insist that many of the projects from Sect. 1 are analyses of concepts, despite my claim to the contrary). So, I can *say* that I have presented a defense of conceptual analysis, if I like, but all that I have really done is to effect a bit of relabeling such that “conceptual analysis”, in my mouth, means something different from what all of my interlocutors choose to use it to mean.

I am happy to admit that my defense of conceptual analysis depends, in part, on the verbal claim that the extension of “conceptual analysis” includes the projects from Sect. 1. However, it is not in general true that terms mean or refer to whatever one *chooses* to mean or refer to with them. The semantics of “conceptual analysis”, no less than any other term, is not the sort of thing over which any one speaker, or even any particular group of speakers, has any real control. Choosing to mean something by “conceptual analysis” might result, on some occasion, in communicating a speaker’s meaning that diverges from its semantic meaning, but surely the question of whether skepticism about conceptual analysis is justified is a question that should be understood to concern those practices and projects that fall into the extension of the term, where that extension is determined by its semantic meaning, not by whatever possibly quite idiosyncratic speaker’s meaning some individual philosopher might choose to use it to convey.<sup>35</sup>

## 4 Conclusion

My case for anti-skepticism about conceptual analysis begins by accepting that there is a wide range of actual philosophical projects that really do count as examples of conceptual analysis. If we choose to use “conceptual analysis” to mean a practice that must involve the analysis of concepts (although, as I have said, I don’t think such a

<sup>35</sup> Could we choose to use “the Holy Roman Empire” to refer to something that is all of holy, Roman, and an empire? Perhaps so. But that would not make “the Holy Roman Empire was not an empire” false. It would just make it possible to pragmatically convey a falsehood by its means.

choice is really possible), then skepticism about conceptual analysis does not seem to me to have many actual examples of philosophical projects in its target range. As I have argued, all of the projects usually cited as examples are in fact *not* examples of projects involving the analysis of concepts. Perhaps, as I tend to think, philosophers should not spend their time analyzing concepts. But I do not think this normative claim about how philosophy ought to be done applies to conceptual analysis as it is actually practiced. Conceptual analysts analyze philosophically significant phenomena, not concepts, and they have been doing so all along, from at least the advent of analytic philosophy—and perhaps much earlier—down to the present day.

Although it has not been my central focus here, and although I have distanced myself from some of the ideas prevalent in the recent literature on revisionism and conceptual engineering, this paper can be read as offering normative advice about how to understand the term, “conceptual analysis”. I have argued that “conceptual analysis” is a misnomer, and that its use in describing certain philosophical projects is misleading, connoting, as it does, that concepts are the targets of conceptual analyses. Despite this, I do not think it is necessary to purge the term from our vocabularies, nor do I think that we would be much better off if everyone were henceforth to adopt my “conceptual analysis without concepts” formulation.<sup>36</sup> As I have also argued, “conceptual analysis” *already* refers to philosophical projects that seek to analyze philosophical phenomena, not our concepts of these phenomena. Its meaning does not need any ameliorating, and I have not attempted to give it any here. What needs correcting is only certain beliefs about conceptual analysis and “conceptual analysis”, corrections that will hopefully result from this paper reaching its intended audience.

I should emphasize that I take my defense of conceptual analysis in the preceding pages to be just that: a defense of *conceptual analysis*. Other methodologists (some of whom I have cited in this connection earlier) have defended, as I have here, a “phenomena-not-concepts” interpretation of philosophical practice, and some have insisted, again as I have here, that some of the projects described in Sect. 1 are not projects or analyses that concern concepts or the meanings of words. Distinctive of my view is the additional claim that the projects from Sect. 1 *are* conceptual analyses, misnomerically so called, and that defenders of the phenomena-not-concepts interpretation of philosophical practice *are* (mostly unwittingly it seems) defending conceptual analysis. These earlier defenses, however, are incomplete: they do not,

<sup>36</sup> Nor need we replace “conceptual analysis” with the older and far less misleading label, “philosophical analysis”, despite what I say in note 30, above. An anonymous reviewer (this journal) finds this puzzling: Why *not* recommend this replacement, given my overall view? There are at least three reasons. First, it will not work. The use of “conceptual analysis” is entrenched and the label will continue to circulate long after the argument of this paper becomes (fingers crossed!) well known. Second, we typically do not replace misnomers simply because they are misnomers, and, if we did, that could potentially lead to more confusion, not less. For example, some hearers might mistakenly take me to be talking about a *different* war if I were to try to replace “the Thousand Days’ War” with a new, non-misnomic label in my speech. Similar confusion could result from insisting on “philosophical analysis” over “conceptual analysis”. Third, the replacement would affect only *future* talk of the relevant philosophical methodology. But “conceptual analysis” has been in circulation for decades, and we need the correct interpretation of these past uses more than we need a new non-misnomic label to apply in the future. All that said, I would of course be happy to see individual methodologists making the replacement, so long as they were careful to explain why they were doing so.

for example, address the many objections to conceptual analysis that depend on the Concept Assumption.<sup>37</sup>

One might think that these objections will not even *arise*, if one refuses to class most philosophical projects as instances of conceptual analysis, a refusal characteristic of some earlier defenses of the view that philosophy concerns the phenomena of knowledge, moral responsibility, causation, etc. But, according to me, this refusal involves a mistake: like it or not, Gettier's project of presenting counterexamples to the JTB theory, and the rest of the projects described in Sect. 1, are clear examples of conceptual analysis. Objections to conceptual analysis are objections to these very projects, and to an enormous range of similar philosophical projects. Defending these projects—indeed, defending the phenomena-not-concepts interpretation of philosophical practice—requires mounting a defense of conceptual analysis itself, including defending it against skeptical objections based on the Concept Assumption. These objections are misconceived, as I have argued, but they are still objections *to conceptual analysis*, and hence they are objections, for example, to the project Gettier undertook when arguing against the JTB theory. A complete defense of such projects thus requires, as I have tried to accomplish here, canvassing, and replying to, all of the many overarching reasons for skepticism about conceptual analysis. It will not do to simply say that this or that philosophical project is not “really” an example of a conceptual analysis in the first place, or that, despite appearances, analytic philosophy does not actually engage in any conceptual analysis at all. That attitude betrays a misunderstanding of what we are talking about when we speak of “conceptual analysis”, a misunderstanding that can be corrected, as I have urged, by thinking about the history of the use of the term, and by being alive to the possibility that “conceptual analysis” is a misleading misnomer.<sup>38</sup>

Should philosophers continue to engage in conceptual analysis (without concepts)? As I have hinted in several places earlier, I think that philosophical investigation into the phenomena of knowledge, free will, personal identity, morality, reference, and causation has yielded important insights. Some of these have been derived from conceptual analysis, so naturally I think that the practice is worthwhile. I have not added anything to any of these analyses, nor have I defended any specific analysis. Rather, I hope to have shown that most of the reasons for blanket skepticism about the practice are bad reasons.

<sup>37</sup> An anonymous reviewer (this journal) cites Kornblith (2002), Williamson (2007), and me (2015) as advocates of a “thoroughly material-mode method of philosophical investigation” and questions whether it is necessary to tack on a defense of conceptual analysis to the views of these methodologists, especially given that I agree that philosophy proceeds in a thoroughly material mode and does not take concepts or word meanings as its subject matter. As I say here, and as I elaborate in the next paragraph of the main text, I regard these earlier defenses – my own earlier defense included – of the “resolutely material-mode interpretation of philosophical practice”, as the reviewer also characterizes it, as crucially incomplete.

<sup>38</sup> The anonymous reviewer I mentioned in the previous note also criticizes me for irrelevantly discussing “the pros and cons of conceptual analysis” in “its usual concept-involving understanding”. Why do that, she or he asks, if I regard that usual understanding as having few or no actual instances? But I do not take myself to have been discussing the pros and cons of *the usual understanding* of conceptual analysis, except to say that it has few or no actual instances and involves a serious *misunderstanding* of what conceptual analysis involves (a pretty big con). My discussion of pros and cons was intended as a discussion of the pros and cons of conceptual analysis, *properly* or *correctly*—even though usually wrongly—understood.

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