There Are No Unanalyzable Concepts: A Critique of Primitivism

By Gregory Frisby

Submitted to
Central European University
Department of Philosophy

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Supervisor: Michael V. Griffin

Budapest, Hungary
2020

Abstract

Some philosophers assume that our fundamental concepts are unanalyzable, or 'primitive'. In this thesis, I'll join P.F. Strawson in questioning this assumption. I'll critique the most plausible arguments for primitivism, specifically those made from conceptual regresses, sensory qualities, and the past failures of conceptual analysis. I'll then provide a case against primitivism, my arguments being that (1) primitivists haven't provided plausible examples of primitives, (2) primitivism doesn't have an adequate explanation of contradictory terms, and (3) primitivism seemingly can't account for how primitives could relate to other concepts in propositions.

Acknowledgements

This thesis has been simmering in my mind for a while, so I owe a huge debt of gratitude to all who have stirred the pot by joining me in conversation and debate. In this regard I especially thank my former roommates Zachary Willcutt, Kamyar Asasi, and Gabi Dumet for the hours we spent brainstorming, critiquing, debating, and speculating. I am likewise thankful to Howard Robinson and Tim Crane of CEU's philosophy department for their cheerful willingness to discuss almost any philosophical problem with which I bothered them during office hours. I am indebted to Tom Rooney of the writing department for his advice on improving my style, clarifying my arguments, and getting my commas under control. And, of course, I thank my thesis advisor, Mike Griffin, for his helpful feedback and critique, without which this thesis would have been palpably lesser in quality.

A philosopher ought to acknowledge his debts to Plato, Descartes, Wittgenstein and all the others upon whose shoulders he stands (or jumps around). I do so, and am especially grateful to George Berkeley.

I thank my siblings and parents for being present in my absence from home, and Mom and Dad for reading drafts of this thesis.

Table of Contents

Preface

Any piece of writing sixty pages long has a motivation. I'll lay down mine up front, because I think doing so will give context and make the point of my argument clearer. Consider the following propositions:

- 'Causation requires an agent.'
- 'Goodness is convertible with being.'
- 'Accidents exist in substances.'
- 'Murder is wrong.'
- 'Truth is a property of propositions and beliefs, not objects.'
- 'Pain cannot occur outside the mind.'
- 'Adultery is wrong.'
- 'There cannot be a necessary being.'

Regardless of their truth or falsity, these propositions are peculiar in that they can't be empirically verified or falsified. You cannot do an experiment in order to determine whether goodness is convertible with being. So, how can we know whether they're true or false, or even begin to discuss their veracity in the first place?

In the long term, I wish to argue for the venerable claim that these propositions are *analytic,* or something near enough. That is to say, they are true or false in virtue of their meanings. If it's true that murder is wrong, it's because of what 'murder' and 'wrong' mean. I candidly admit that I don't think 'synthetic a-priori' or 'necessary a-posteriori' propositions exist – at least, not in the sense in which many people think they do. I also admit that this puts me at odds with many respectable opinions.

I'm not going to argue for this wild claim in my thesis. But I will argue for a related, less crazy claim: namely, that concepts are never semantically isolated. I think this claim is eminently reasonable and even trivial upon consideration, and has independent value regardless of what one thinks about my overall project. Alas, not everyone seems to agree, so I've taken the time to argue for conceptual non-primitivity, with a mind towards eventually putting it to work in an argument for the hegemony of a-priori analyticity. This said, remember that my claim is distinct from my long-term project. I'm not going to talk much about the mind-world relationship, which would be necessary if I wanted to address the latter.

Introduction

The analysis of concepts lies at the heart of philosophy. But philosophers sometimes bring analysis to a halt by positing simple or undefinable 'primitives' which must be accepted as 'intuitively' understood without further analysis or question.[1] By contrast, I suggest with Strawson that concepts are not 'simple' in this way. They are probably better understood as interdefinable, which is to say semantically connected with other concepts in non-vicious circles. Because they are interdefinable, all concepts are in principle analyzable through description of their relations.[2]

My aim is to contribute to the literature by (a) drawing attention to 'primitivism', and (b) providing a preliminary evaluation of it as a philosophical thesis. Strawson,

1 For discussion of the meaning of the term 'analysis', see Robinson, 1965. Note that my expansive use of 'analysis' conforms with Strawson's in his 1973 and 1992.
2 Strawson, 1992

who is among the few to have noticed and discussed primitivism openly, does not offer much in the way of arguments against it. This was entirely appropriate in context (he was concerned with explaining his positive vision for analysis), but I'd like to give primitivism a hearing.[3]

In Chapter One, I'll clarify my assumptions and provide illustrations of the primitivist vision of analysis and the broadly Strawsonian alternative. I'll explain what sorts of assumptions make primitivism attractive or unattractive, and note primitivism's status in the literature.

In Chapter Two, I'll describe and critique arguments for primitivism, beginning with the argument that analysis must end somewhere lest there be an infinite regress or vicious circle. My reply will be that though analysis must end somewhere, it need not end with primitives; it may just as well end with a Strawsonian web of interdefinables.

After this, I'll counter the claim that sensibilia, such as colors or sounds, are primitive because they seem incommunicable and simple. I'll note that conceptualizing is not the same as perceiving or imagining, as the argument supposes, and that our concepts of sensible qualities are not simple. They are, for instance, seemingly connected with the concepts of space and experience.

Finally, I'll turn to the argument that philosophers have yet to agree upon the analyses of any significant philosophical concepts, and that this is evidence for primitivism. I'll reply that analysis has not been a failure, and that there are alternative explanations for why it's had setbacks.

In Chapter 3, I'll suggest that primitivism is implausible. I'll build my case by showing (1) that the most plausibly primitive concepts are not primitive upon closer

3 Strawson, 1973, 1992

inspection, (2) that primitivism doesn't have a good explanation of the existence of incompatible terms, since terms cannot be incompatible if they are simple and isolated, and (3) that terms must be able to fit into propositions, and that they can only do if they are semantically related in specific ways.

Chapter 1. The Problem

A 'concept' is a sub-propositional unit of meaning that enters into propositions.[4] Concepts are distinct from words; both '*chien*' and 'dog' mean dog. Some near synonyms for 'concept' include 'term', 'idea', and 'notion,' and examples of concepts include 'green', 'oak', 'existence', and 'John.'

As Strawson says, some concepts are more fundamental than others.[5] They are "basic to our whole conceptual structure, to our entire conception of the world." Basic concepts are "highly general… non-dismantlable… [and] non-contingent." In this, they contrast with those specific, dismantlable, and contingent 'complex' concepts that we encounter so often in everyday life. Consider the difference between the concepts of 'quantity' and 'firework'. 'Quantity' seems relatively basic, and 'firework' relatively non-basic. It is very difficult to imagine speaking or thinking without an understanding of 'quantity', whereas it is very easy to imagine doing so without an understanding of 'firework'. Basic concepts like 'quantity' are like letters in our conceptual alphabet, and non-basic concepts like 'firework' like words spelled with the letters.

4 See Margolis and Laurence, 1999
5 Strawson, 1992

1.1. What is Primitivism?

Some philosophers (whom I shall call 'primitivists') hold that while non-basic concepts like 'firework' can be defined or analyzed, basic concepts like 'quantity' cannot.[6] Heidegger notes this tendency in his discussion of the history of ontology:[7]

> … The phenomenon of the *equiprimordiality* of constitutive items [i.e. the interrelations among basic concepts] has often been disregarded in ontology, because of a methodologically unrestrained tendency to derive everything and anything from some simple 'primal ground' [i.e. primitives].

In what is plausibly an expression of the primitivist assumption, Descartes asserts that:

> …we have certain basic notions… [and] we are bound to go wrong… when we try to explain or define one of these notions in terms of another, because each of them is basic and thus can be understood only through itself.[8]

And, according to Locke:

> [T]he different terms of a definition, signifying different ideas, can't jointly represent an idea that is simple and thus has no complexity at all. So definitions can't be given for the names of simple ideas.[9]

Finally, according to Moore:

> Definitions… are only possible when the object or notion in question is something complex. You can give a definition of a horse, because a horse has many different properties and qualities… But when you have enumerated them all, when you have reduced a horse to his simplest terms, you can no longer define those terms. They are *simply something which you think of or perceive* [emphasis added], and to anyone who cannot think of or perceive them, you can never, by any definition, make their nature known.[10]

6 For an alternative summary of the introductory issues, see Asay, 2013, pp. 28-39, or Szubka, 1998.
7 Heidegger, 1973 / 1927, pg. 170
8 Descartes, 2017/1643, pg. 2
9 Locke, 2013/1689, pg. 156; *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, III.4.7
10 Moore, 1959/1903, pg. 7

Other key figures, such as Leibniz, Russell, and Tarski seem to hold similar positions.[11]

Of course, there are numerous historical nuances I'm glossing over, since my main interest in primitivism is not historical or exegetical, but theoretical and practical: what relevance does it have for us today, as analytic philosophers? Can it be justified using non-system dependent arguments? Such an investigation seems warranted, since primitivism is alive and well in recent philosophy (according to Strawson, anyhow), and since there's little literature on it. Strawson notes that analytics tend to dislike the allegation that their analyses are 'circular', and that this sensitivity only makes sense if one implicitly presumes that analyses must avoid all forms of circularity, i.e. end with primitives.[12] Asay claims that primitivism is on the rise,[13] with increasing numbers of philosophers being willing to endorse the primitivity of concepts like 'truth', 'knowledge', 'identity', 'law of nature', and 'naturalness'.[14] While I won't judge whether these demographic suggestions are accurate, in my own experience many philosophers do indeed tacitly endorse primitivism. Some even consider it mere common-sense upon presentation.[15] Doesn't analysis 'have to end somewhere'?

This said, primitivism isn't often discussed openly. Hence, there is no 'school of primitivism', and it's hard to come across explicit attempts to articulate or justify the assumption. Of course, this doesn't prove that the assumption is non-existent or irrelevant – Strawson wasn't attacking a strawman. To the contrary, the absence of explicit discussion can be interpreted as evidence that the assumption is so entrenched

11 See Plaisted, 2003; Russell, 1900, pp. 18-19; and Tarksi, 1941/1994, pg. 110
12 Strawson, 1992
13 Asay, 2013, pg. 39
14 Respectively, see Asay, 2013; Williamson, 2002; McGinn, 2000; Maudlin, 2007; and Lewis, 1983.
15 As a non-scientific aside: to test my sociological intuitions, I posted a poll on the topic on my philosophy meme-page. Of the seventy-four people who have replied, sixty-one percent have favored primitivism. This is not exactly a publishable source of empirical data, but it's exactly what I expected given my personal encounters and research on the topic.

that it is simply taken for granted. The most important consensuses are sometimes the ones nobody feels the need to discuss. And, again, given the lack of explicit discussion, my project seems justified, given that it fills a gap in the literature.

So, what concepts are supposed to be primitive? Seemingly, there are two basic possibilities. 'Rationalist' primitivists (as I'll call them) tend towards calling abstract terms like 'existence' or 'cause' primitive, whereas 'empiricists' seem to think that sensations or 'ideas' are the true atoms. As Strawson puts it:

> ...in the British empiricist tradition ... the candidate atoms, the simple elements of analysis ... [have been] those fleeting items of subjective experience, or those parts of such items, which David Hume called 'simple impressions'; and also those supposed copies of these, presented in imagination or memory, which he called 'simple ideas'.[16]

Some cognitive scientists seem to be primitivists as well, in both the rationalist and empiricist senses.[17] And Jerry Fodor, who is by all accounts a radical 'atomist', holds that almost *all* concepts are primitive, including as unlikely candidates as 'doorknob' and 'to paint.'[18]

But if primitivist sentiments do not necessarily involve agreement on what the primitives are, there seems to be some shared conception of how they work.[19] Of course, I am tarring with a single brush, but primitivists generally seem committed to a decompositional notion of analysis – to the thought that primitives 'combine' into contingent complexes (or 'complex ideas', or 'derived terms') that 'contain' them. On this conception, successful analysis is simply the 'unpackaging' of primitives (or

16 Strawson, 1992, pg. 20
17 Laurence and Margolis, 1999; also see Pinker, 2007, pg. 90
18 See Fodor, 1998. I do not address Fodor's theories in this thesis, as they have been critiqued extensively elsewhere; see Margolis and Laurence, 1999.
19 Fodor, 1998, being a notable exception.

relatively basic concepts) latent in any given complex. Consider Leibniz's notion of the 'alphabet of thought':[20]

Figure 1. Leibnizian Primitivism

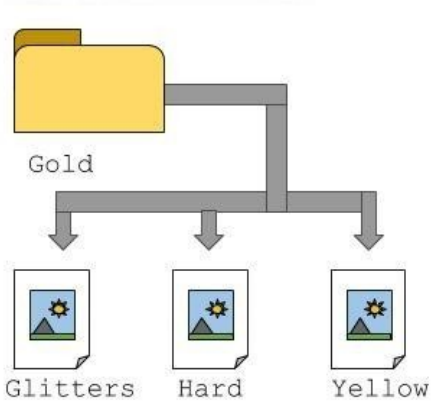
*n*th Level	etc.						
3rd Level.	ABCD	ABCE	ABDE	ADEF	etc.		
2nd Level	ABC	ABD	ABE	DEC	BED	etc.	
1st Level	AB	AC	AD	AE	BE	etc.	
Bedrock	A	B	C	D	E	F	G

At the higher levels we see complex terms (represented by collections of letters) which are aggregates of individual primitives taken from the lowest level (represented by the singular letters). If 'A' in the above meant 'unmarried' and 'B' meant 'man' (suppose these could be primitives) then 'AB' would mean 'unmarried-man' though we would normally just say 'bachelor'. The correct analysis of 'AB' would be to break it down into 'A' and 'B', such that anyone could tell that 'AB' meant nothing more than 'unmarried man'. (Of course, rather than terms like 'man' or 'bachelor', primitivists would use concepts that are basic for the bedrock.)

Locke proposes a similar-sounding theory using sensory ideas as his primitives:

Figure 2. Lockean Primitivism

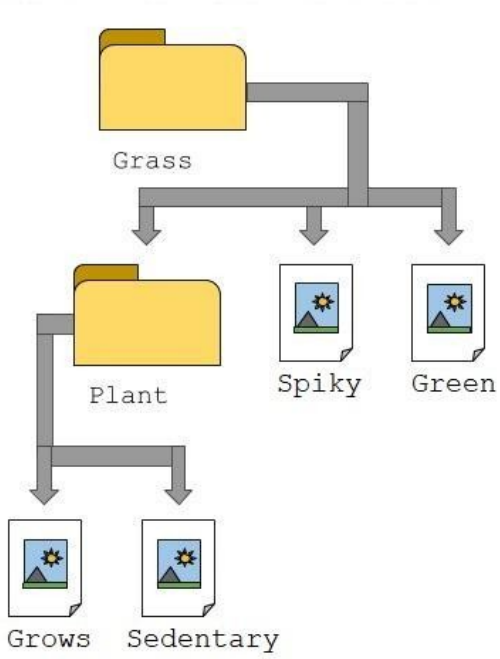
20 For Leibniz's theory of primitives see his "On Universal Synthesis and Analysis, or the Art of Discovery and Judgment" and "Two Studies in the Logical Calculus" in Loemaker, 1989. See Plaisted, 2003, and Lodge and Puryear, 2006, for interpretation and discussion.



Here, 'gold' is a complex term, and its ultimate components are sense ideas like 'glitters', 'hard', and 'yellow'.[21] The aggregate is created by the mind after experiencing the relevant sensations together a sufficient number of times; we then use these complexes as shortcuts, so as to avoid re-enumerating all the features that tend to conglomerate in experience. Thus, we refer to 'gold', rather than 'glitters', 'hard', and 'yellow'. The complexes are sometimes contained in other complexes:

Figure 3: A More Complex Lockean Analysis

21 This is not Locke's own analysis. I provide the above for the sake of simplicity.



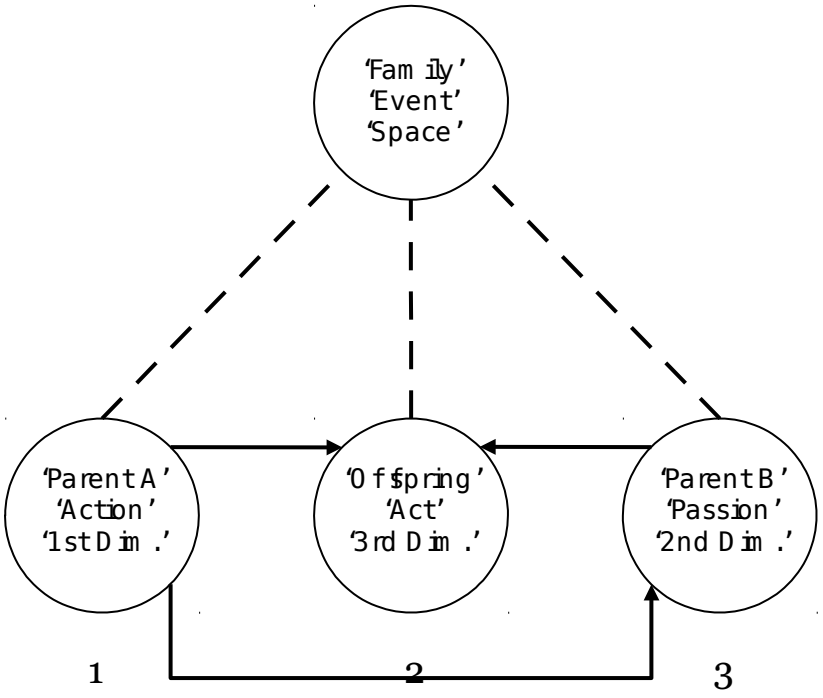
'Grass' is a higher-order complex directly containing several primitives ('spiky' and 'green') as well as another complex term ('plant'), which itself breaks down into the primitive ideas of 'grows' and 'sedentary'. (Suppose these could be primitive.) Note that the diagram could in principle have omitted 'plant' altogether, and directly included all the primitives under 'grass'. That is, the concept of 'grass' exists as it does for purely psychological reasons.

There is nothing wrong with this form of analysis, and it may even be the right approach in some cases. But I would suggest with Strawson that it is not the only approach, and that is not sufficient when conceptual basics are involved. It seems to me that Strawson is correct in thinking that basic concepts are likely interdefinable, or that one can't fully grasp their meanings without understanding how they connect. To show what a non-primitivist alternative to 'decompositional' analysis might look like, here

are a few examples of how interdefinables (or non-reductive analysis in general) might work.

A good example of an interdefinable (albeit one that probably isn't basic) is the concept of 'family', taken in the biological sense. A genetic family is defined by the relations among the various organisms involved, that is, by the parents and offspring, with the male and female parents being defined by their respective reproductive roles (as defined by biologists), and the offspring being the entity to whom each parent contributes genetic material. So, the concept of a family doesn't merely agglomerate family members in the fashion in which 'bachelor' simply agglomerates 'unmarried' and 'man'. The analysis of 'family' is not 'F = ABC'. One only understands the concept if one understands the overall network of relations among its members. Lest one worry that this example is too contingent, here's another. 'Events', in the folk understanding, exist as four interdefinable elements. There is the 'event' itself, which contains some agent's 'acting', a patient's 'being acted upon', and the type of 'act' that relates them. For instance, Sally might hit Johnny (the 'action'), causing Johnny to be hit by Sally (the 'passion'), and from this it would follow that there has been a blow (the 'act'). This overall will be the 'event', which is defined in terms of these three, which are defined in terms of each other. As another example, 'space' is a meaningful concept involving relations among concepts like dimension, quantity, extension, and so forth. Figure 4 depicts what might be a structure of these sorts of analyses:

Figure 4: Strawsonian Analysis



There are many other examples of plausibly interdefinable 'basic' concepts I could use, including those of substance, property, mode, time, causation, and change (by my lights, anyways), but I've hopefully given a feel for what a non-primitivist understanding of basic concepts and analysis might look like.

1.2. Definitions and Assumptions

For the sake of clarity, I'll try to tighten what I mean by 'primitivism'. A challenge in doing this is that, as mentioned previously, primitivism is typically an assumption rather than an explicit doctrine. As a consequence, I have to define it in the mode of a naturalist or anthropologist examining a behavior or societal practice. For practical purposes, it seems to me that the essence of primitivism is that it allows one to parry the demand for a definition by calling something unanalyzable; at a certain point,

one simply claims to 'see' or 'understand' the meaning of a term, without needing to say anything more. (I don't mean to deride primitivism in saying this; it may be a perfectly legitimate move, if there are true unanalyzables.) From a more theoretical standpoint, the assumption is that:

> …each primitive is independent of the others. Like the elements in the periodic table, each primitive concept is a distinct existence…They may come together to forge new concepts… but *no primitive concept depends on any other for its own existence or intelligibility* [emphasis added]… [primitives] are rugged individualists.[22]

Drawing on Strawson and Asay's definitions, I'll understand primitives to be concepts that are (1) undefinable, (2) simple in meaning, and (3) semantically isolated.[23] I'll briefly expand upon what these points mean.

First, regarding 'undefinable'. There is of course no settled definition of 'definition'.[24] But definition is at least an attempt to explain the meaning of a term, or to make a term intelligible. It's definitions Socrates is looking for in the Platonic dialogues: what do we *mean* by 'good', 'piety,' or 'virtue'?

This said, a great deal hinges on what it is to 'understand' a concept or to 'grasp' its meaning. Suppose someone claims to understand the concept of 'necessity'. How do we determine whether she genuinely does? I'll assume that a term is intelligible to us if we know how to use it correctly. We would not say that someone really understood 'necessity' if he or she could not formulate coherent sentences using it, just as we would not say that someone understood grammar if he or she could not speak grammatically.

22 Asay, 2013, pg. 32
23 Strawson, 1992; Asay, 2013, pg. 32
24 Robinson, 1965

Of course, one might understand a term either implicitly or explicitly. One doesn't need to explicitly *define* 'red' or 'necessity' in order to know how to use them. One might even have an incorrect explicit understanding of a term (i.e. believe it to have a definition which does not correspond to its use), while still implicitly knowing how to use it. And, of course, I admit that it'd be oversimplifying to think that understanding is *only* use or linguistic competence. But it seems to me that it's a good rule of thumb that 'inner' states or dispositions like 'understanding a concept' manifest themselves externally (how else could we talk about them?), and that linguistic competence at least *shows* understanding.

So, I'll take definitions or analyses to be at least ways to clarify the proper usage. I'll assume that they do not have to be complete to be good. It seems legitimate to define an elephant as an animal and a mammal, even if this is not a complete description of elephant physiology and natural history. Also, note that some primitivists might allow that primitives can be given ostensive 'definitions'. But this is distinct from the purely verbal definitions or analyses about which I'm concerned, which in theory allow one to have a concept in the abstract, or without first-hand experience. So, I won't take this as a counterexample to the basic primitivist claim regarding 'undefinability'.

Regarding 'simple in meaning', I take a term's 'meaning' to be whatever determines how it can be correctly and truthfully applied. For instance, I'll take the meaning of 'red' to be whatever determines the semantically proper and/or true application of 'red'. A realist about universals could say that correct application is determined by a thing's possession of redness, whereas a nominalist might say that

'redness' is determined by resemblance relations among particular reds. I only stipulate that meaning-fixing facts cannot be purely extensional – that is, that they can't only be about the particular red things in *our* possible world, since there's evidently a sense in which there could have been one fewer red without changing the meaning of 'red'. How one wishes to cash this out ontologically is one's choice.

With meaning construed this way, what is it for a meaning to be 'simple'? I assume that 'simple' concepts have only one thing determining how they may be applied, and that this is not decomposable. If 'red' is simple, then no fact determines whether something is red beyond its just being red, full stop. By contrast, the correct application of non-simple terms like 'bachelor' involve multiple considerations, e.g. '*x* is a bachelor iff *x* is a man and *x* is unmarried'.

Finally, what does it mean for a term to be 'semantically isolated'? To reiterate Asay's claim:

> ...each primitive is independent of the others. Like the elements in the periodic table, each primitive concept is a distinct existence...They may come together to forge new concepts... but *no primitive concept depends on any other for its own existence or intelligibility* [emphasis added]... [primitives] are rugged individualists.[25]

To be semantically isolated is to be a 'rugged individualist' in the manner described above; the concept can be understood on its own, without help. If 'elephant' were primitive (which it clearly is not), it wouldn't require understandings of 'animal', 'grey', 'nose', or 'mammal' for proper use.

25 Asay, 2013, pg. 32

To sum up, for there to be genuinely primitive concepts, some concepts must have meanings determined by single, non-decomposable facts regarding correct application, and the concepts must be intelligible on their own. Note that this doesn't mean that additional empirical facts might not be contingently entailed by the meaning-fixing fact. For instance, it might be that if something is red, it's also a fact that we call it red, that it's one's favorite color, and so on. But these contingent facts presuppose the meaning of the term in question, and can't be used to define it.

1.3. Motives for Accepting Primitivism

Before moving to the primitivist arguments, it'll be helpful to consider why one would find the assumption appealing or unappealing in the first place. There are at least three factors that could incline one towards primitivism: (a) acceptance of nominalism, (b) holding that one may actively 'cognize' ideas or concepts in the absence of propositions, and (c) the foundationalist desire for perfectly understood starting points.

First, nominalism might incline one towards primitivism (though it does not entail it) because if one holds that only particulars exist, one will be more likely to think that there may be (in some sense) no *real* commonality among things, thus making it more plausible to think of concepts or things as 'rugged individualists'. A realist would seemingly have to maintain that red is a subclass or species of 'color'. But if this is not so – if red is just one set or predicate among many – then it's more plausible to think of it as a simple. So, we don't need to posit that basic terms have any intrinsic complexity or connectedness (e.g. that 'red' belongs in the genus of 'color').

Second, one might think it's possible to 'think about' a term without thinking anything in particular about it. People often seem to make this presumption: surely, I can think on 'red' in the abstract? This 'inner vision' viewpoint may lead one to believe that concepts are not only be capable of being thought about in isolation but of being understood in isolation. How could one think about an isolated concept unless one understood it? Lest this congeal into an argument for primitivism, note that if we can think about concepts in this abstract sense, then we can think about complex concepts in this sense, where the inference to primitivity would be unjustified. So, the ability to 'see' a concept in the abstract doesn't prove that some concepts need to be primitive.

Thirdly, one might be a sort of semantic 'foundationalist' and hold that self-evident meanings are (for some reason) needed in order to begin analysis or to understand meanings at all. We need to just 'get' some terms, perhaps ones like 'existence' or 'red', without needing to define them, or else we couldn't understand or analyze anything else. But a non-primitivist need not disagree; he or she must only maintain that the self-evident concepts one understands are interdefinable. The primitivist might have been thinking that in order to understand a term, the non-primitivist would require that we have explicitly defined it. But understanding a term and being able to define it are two separate things, just as understanding grammar and being able to teach grammar are separate things. One may have an implicit grasp of a concept, without being able to explain the concept aloud.

Alternatively, the foundationalist might simply see the task of analysis as too daunting without starting points, *viz.* terms that need not be defined. If analysis involves unravelling webs of preconnected things, how could one hope to reach

semantic knowledge? How could one understand anything before one understood everything? Of course, analysis *is* daunting, but this doesn't entail much else.

1.4. Motives for Critiquing Primitivism

Why might one find primitivism *unattractive*? First, primitivism does not provide the epistemic goods the foundationalist is hoping for. The only means by which one would be able to recognize primitives would be by their 'self-evidence' or by one's murky intuitions (well-known problems regarding 'clear and distinct ideas' come to mind). Or, alternatively, one would have to note the extreme difficulty analysts might have in analyzing a term, and infer that the term is unanalyzable. But murky intuition is unreliable, and the latter seems to be just giving up.

Next, far from merely disappointing foundationalist hopes, primitivism has the worrisome consequence of justifying the posit of terms that are exempted from semantic inspection, in a field where analysis is part of the point. Socrates reputedly fathered philosophy by asking people to clarify what they meant by 'justice' and 'piety.' How far would he have gotten if the Athenians could have told him that 'virtue' is primitive? More recently, Heidegger asked us to consider what we mean by 'Being'. But as he himself noted, we can't even raise the question if something like primitivism is assumed, if it's insisted that Being does "[not] require any definition" since "everyone uses it constantly and already understands what he means by it."[26] And, even if the philosophical investigation of terms like 'Justice' and 'Being' weren't worthwhile in itself, it seems that definitions are still important methodologically. As Carnap notes, nonsense tends to ensue when philosophers are allowed to attribute meaning to words

26 Heidegger, 1973 / 1927, pg. 21

that lack clear criteria of application.[27] So, we should be wary of allowing intuition alone to determine usage.

My concern is not, of course, that primitivism encourages philosophers to 'cheat' in analysis. But I do worry that it tricks them into overlooking (a) perfectly reasonable analytic projects and (b) their own presumptions regarding the meanings of terms. As an example of (a), consider Heidegger. I gained a great deal from his phenomenological analyses in *Being and Time*. But if I'd been convinced that nothing good could come of trying to analyze 'being', since it's primitive, I might have overlooked the work. Regarding (b), imagine I believed 'goodness' to be primitive and therefore refused to define it. I might consequently remain unconscious of my *implicit* understanding of 'good', because I assumed that my own usage could not be fruitfully analyzed. And, far worse than concealing implicit assumptions, primitivism might obscure the fact that one's usage of a technical term might be hopelessly inconsistent or vague. Suppose that I were to say that 'good' is primitive, and then claimed that charity, murder, wallets, existence, negation, and rabbits were good. I'd clearly have gone astray, but nobody could strictly speaking critique me on my own grounds, since I wouldn't have provided a clear definition or 'shown my work' (as mathematics teachers say). Of course, this is an extreme example. But it's the less extreme inconsistencies and obscurities that are more likely to go unnoticed and to cause philosophical trouble in the long term.

Of course, philosophical beliefs can have undesirable practical consequences without being false. But given the theoretical and practical importance of analysis and definitions, the theory that some important terms are unanalyzable ought to be

27 Carnap, 1959 / 1931

scrutinized carefully. But though primitivism is often accepted (or so it seems), it is seldom argued for, or even explicitly discussed as a philosophical thesis, with some of the only recent discussions of it being in Strawson, Szubka, Banicki, and Asay.[28]

Chapter 2. Arguments for Primitivism

I'll now critique the arguments for primitivism, of which I've noticed three.

2.1. The Regress Argument

The most plausible argument for primitivism is, in a nutshell, that 'There must be primitives, since analysis has to stop *somewhere*.' Leibniz elaborates:

> Whatever is thought by us is either conceived through itself, or involves the concept of another. Whatever is involved in the concept of another is again either conceived through itself or involves the concept of another; and so on. So one must either proceed to infinity, or all thoughts are resolved into those which are conceived through themselves.[29]

In other words, analysis must stop somewhere or there will be an infinite regress. Aside for infinite regresses, one might also worry about vicious circles.[30] To define X as Y, Y as Z, and Z as X relies on the explanandum in the explanation, which is clearly vicious. So, informally, here's one version of the overall argument:[31]

(1) Analysis must end in either infinite regresses, circles, or primitives.
(2) Analysis cannot end in either infinite regresses or circles.
(3) By process of elimination, analysis must end in primitives.

28 See Strawson, 1973, 1991; Szubka, 1998; Banicki, 2012; and Asay, 2013
29 For interpretations of Leibniz's argument see Lodge and Puryear, 2006, Myrdal and Repo, 2016, and Plaisted, 2003.
30 Russell, 1900, pg. 18
31 Asay, 2013, pp. 189-194

Some credible thinkers have allowed infinite regresses, or at least claimed that they aren't necessarily vicious, so one *could* deny Premise 2.[32] However, I myself find the notion of infinite regresses unpalatable, so I won't prolong my argument with a possibility I don't believe in.[33]

That said, how do I counter the argument? The argument fails because there are at least three kinds of circular definition, and one of them is not vicious. So, there's no need to posit primitives. The three kinds of circles in question are those I'll call the 'uninformative', 'nested', and 'interdefinable' varieties. The 'uninformative' variety involves one stage of analysis being no more informative than any other, because each stage just introduces a synonym for the definiendum. For instance, one might define A as B, B as C, and C as A. This sort of 'definition' is problematic because it is not really a definition at all, but rather a series of translations. The 'nested' variety explicitly invokes the definiendum in the definition. For instance, one asserts that a bachelor is a man who has the character of bachelorhood. This kind of circle is not satisfactory, though it can, in fact, be partially informative. For instance, in defining a bachelor as a man who is a bachelor, one at least learns that a bachelor is a man. But the last variety of circle, the 'interdefinable' one, is not vicious at all; in it, a term in the definition cannot be understood without the definiendum, because their meanings are interrelated. There is nothing incoherent about this. Consider 'parent' and 'offspring'. It is impossible to understand what a parent is without understanding what an offspring is, though the terms are non-synonymous and form a coherent conceptual circle.[34]

32 Klein, Aquinas, and Spinoza come to mind. See Klein, 1998, for his thoughts on 'infinitism'. For an introduction to Aquinas' thoughts on infinite regresses see Feser, 2009. Spinoza actually posited infinite regresses; for instance, see his *Ethics* Part I, Proposition 28.

33 But see Myrdal and Repo, 2016, for a critique of Leibniz's argument, which they point out fails to distinguish among different types of infinite regress.

34 See Strawson, 1973, 1992

One possible critique of my response is that one might claim that interdefinability is a phenomenon restricted to less-basic terms, with there being no interdefinability among the basic concepts. Therefore, interdefinables 'supervene upon' (or are reducible to) primitives, and can in principle be analyzed away. And, the objector would continue, if there are not any *irreducibly* interdefinable terms, then I haven't given an example of a non-vicious, non-defective circular definition, so the Regress Argument could still hold. I acknowledge that the argument could hold if it could be proven that interdefinables are reducible to non-interdefinable primitives, but I've never seen an argument to this effect. (I note this reply for the sake of pointing to ways in which a primitivist might advance the discussion.)

Asay makes another objection: if grasping the meaning of any given term in a closed loop of interdefinables depended upon grasping the others, no terms in the circle could be grasped in the first place by one who did not already grasp them all. So interdefinables would have to be innate.[35]

I do not find the nativism objection very persuasive. First, why can't one acquire multiple concepts at the same time? Perhaps in vision one might simultaneously acquire the concepts of color and extension, not to mention components of these such as hue, brightness, length, breadth, and shading? It's not obvious that it's impossible to acquire 'webs' of concepts all at once. But even if it were, many philosophers and cognitive scientists are comfortable with a-priori knowledge and concepts, and it's precisely the basic concepts that we might expect to be native rather than acquired. So, the objection doesn't seem to hold much weight.

35 Asay, 2013, pg. 191

To summarize my case against the Regress Argument: if definition must end somewhere, there is as yet no reason to believe that it must end in primitive terms. It might just as well end with non-vicious, circular networks, as Strawson suggests.[36]

2.2. The Empiricist Argument

The second argument is that sensations or quality-terms, such as 'yellow', are simple and incommunicable. And, as they do not seem to require other terms for their intelligibility (one need not understand 'red' to understand 'blue'), they seem to satisfy the requirements for primitivity. As Moore says, such ideas are:

> ...simply something which you think of or perceive, and to anyone who cannot think of or perceive them, you can never, by any definition, make their nature known.[37]

A point of clarification: the primitivist is not arguing that sense ideas *as studied by natural science* are undefinable. Clearly they are not. As far as physics is concerned, it is perfectly acceptable to analyze a color as wavelengths, particles, and so on. The primitivist is rather concerned with *phenomenal* terms. As Moore says:

> We may try to define [yellow], by describing its physical equivalent... But a moment's reflection is sufficient to shew that those light-vibrations are not themselves what we mean by yellow. They are not what we perceive. Indeed, we should never have been able to discover their existence, unless we had first been struck by the patent difference of quality between the different colours.[38]

According to the empiricist primitivist, it is perfectly conceivable that phenomenal yellow could have been associated with a different wavelength of light, so phenomenal yellow is distinct from physical yellow, or at least that can't be analyzed in terms of it.

36 Strawson, 1973, 1992
37 Moore, 1959/1903, pg. 7
38 Moore, 1959/1903, pg. 10

There are two problems with the argument. First, the empiricist seems to be conflating sensory images and experiences with concepts of sensations or sensible qualities. It may or may not be possible to analyze a yellow as it exists (putatively) in the mind or the world (whatever such an 'analysis' would consist of), and it's true that one can conceivably experience yellow without experiencing red (but not without experiencing space, presumably). But the *concept* of yellow is not a sensory image or an experience. To be sure, I cannot by any definition or analysis give you a sensory image of yellow; I cannot put a yellow sense datum, sensation, or perception into your head. But that is not the point of definition or analysis. The point is to show how a concept works and may be used. After all, many philosophers analyze things that cannot be experienced sensorily. I can't give you a raw experience of 'infinity', but we can meaningfully analyze the concept. And it seems perfectly coherent to suppose that even a congenitally blind person might have a concept of yellow (even if he'd have trouble analyzing it on his own), and equally coherent to suppose that a mantis shrimp (who probably experiences more shades of yellow than we do) might not. Again, part of what is at stake is what it means to 'understand'. If understanding a concept means being able to summon up a mental image or to discriminate a feature in the environment, then indeed, definition and analysis cannot help us understand sensibilia. But that's a very unusual way of thinking about analysis, and seems to presume something like an imagist theory of thought.

Second, it's not clear that sense ideas or sensibilia are in fact unanalyzable, since we can fruitfully describe them and clarify the relationships among the sensory basics. For instance, it seems possible to phenomenologically investigate how yellow relates to other colors, to observe that yellow is always in space, or to notice that in general

sensations and feelings, including sights, sounds, touches, tastes, smells, proprioceptive experiences, pains, pleasures, and emotions, seem to be located spatially. If I taste a pineapple, I will feel it on my tongue, not in my feet; if I smell something, I will do so through my nose, not my hands. Spatiality aside, some sensations have precise relations to other sensations in the same modality. Green and red are opposites phenomenologically, as are white and black. One may have a transparent blue, but not a transparent white. If fact, the relations among colors are so systematic that there's a well-developed science of color. And it's precisely relations that define musical notes. Many people couldn't tell the difference between a tune played in two different keys, because while the notes have changed, the relations among them have not. This would be puzzling if sense ideas were primitive blips in an experiential field.

And note that the very fact that qualities are found in an 'experiential field' at all indicates that they are not wholly unanalyzable. If they are experienced, they are *capable* of being experienced, and this is a fact about them that seems constituent of what they are or what they are like. Reds and blues are the sorts of things that we *can* experience sensorially, whereas the number 193,293 is not. Some sense ideas also seem especially connected with experience: consider pleasure and pain, which don't seem to be capable of existing without someone to experience them (whereas extension or color might be able to exist independently). So, it doesn't seem true that sensibilia can't be analyzed. It's perfectly acceptable to define and analyze them phenomenologically, even if one were to stipulate (seemingly incorrectly) that one can't have concepts of sensibilia without having had the requisite phenomenological experiences.

Of course, many truths about phenomenal qualities are hard to notice in the absence of experience. I'm not committing myself to the absurd thesis that one could

develop and easily analyze one's concepts of empirical phenomena without having *any* relevant experience, e.g. that one could reach the concept of blue by thinking hard enough about yellow. It's hard to learn about the relations among, e.g. the colors without comparing them, for instance by looking at a color wheel. And the relations among musical notes can often only be noticed if the notes are played in close succession. But phenomenological analyses seem to add to our concepts of empirical phenomena. Indeed, if we decide to analyze the relations among the colors at all, we must have already realized that they are similar enough that such an analysis would be worthwhile. My point is that there is a meaningful sense in which sensibilia do not seem simple, ineffable, or indescribable.

The upshot of this discussion is that contrary to the empiricist's assumptions, sense ideas don't seem unanalyzable, and don't seem identical with sensory concepts anyhow. It's not apparent that a congenitally blind person couldn't have a concept of 'yellow', nor is it apparent that a sighted person cannot analyze yellowness itself.

2.3. The Argument from Bad Precedent

The final argument for primitivism is the Argument from Bad Precedent. Some have argued that philosophy has yet to produce a non-controversial analysis of any non-trivial term, and that the most plausible explanation is that some terms are primitive.[39] As an example, it is often noted that the closest analytic philosophy has come to a consensual definition of some important term was in the 'justified true belief' account of knowledge.[40] But it's well-known that Gettier debunked this analysis in his infamous four-page paper, with no new consensus having emerged since.[41] And some

39 See Fodor, 1994; Huemer, 2015; or Margolis and Laurence, 1999, 14-16.
40 But see Dutant, 2015, for a historical critique of this claim.
41 Gettier, 1963

note that it's even difficult to define mundane items like 'game' or 'to paint'.[42] But if we cannot define such quotidian things, how can we hope to analyze arcana like 'knowledge' or 'goodness'? As Huemer says, it's been the best and the brightest working on analysis, with full support and for a long time, and their efforts have come to little.[43] So, skepticism about the analyzability of philosophical concepts might seem justified.

One could reply that philosophy in general does not tend to produce universal consensus, just as nations don't always tend to come to full consensus on hot-button issues like immigration, despite there plausibly being objective answers to philosophical and political questions. However, I wouldn't want to rely on this counter: it's a legitimate point that the inability to analyze might show unanalyzability, so I'd like to non-flippantly address the primitivist worry. Fortunately, I don't think there is as much reason for worry as the argument supposes.

The first point is that there is a distinction between complete failure and partial failure. That analysis has not achieved perfect results does not mean that it has achieved no results. For, even if all analysis so far had generated nothing but mistaken analyses, mistakes are not necessarily failures. Knowing what does *not* constitute the correct definition of a term is progress, since it shows what one does not know (the beginning of wisdom, according to Socrates) and alerts one to what future analysis needs to avoid. As Thomas Edison said, he didn't fail a thousand times: he invented the lightbulb in a thousand steps. Once one recognizes the sorts of obstacles that keep resurfacing in one's analyses, one can begin to catalogue and learn from one's mistakes.

But anyhow, analysis hasn't just been a series of mistakes. The oft-referenced case of the justified true belief analysis of knowledge actually shows that progress in

42 Wittgenstein, 2009/1953, and Fodor (1994, 1998)
43 Huemer, 2015, pg. 51

analysis is possible, for though the justified true belief analysis is agreed to be problematic, this is only in respect to *one* part of it ('justified'), with the remaining two-thirds ('true' and 'belief') remaining fairly uncontroversial.[44] After all, the analysis would not have fooled philosophers for so long and attracted so many competent defenders if it had been completely misguided. Also, discovering that JBT was insufficient forced philosophers to refine their thoughts on knowledge, and to develop the field of epistemology in new and original directions. So, it was arguably an advance for the field overall, not a setback.

Anyhow, note that if philosophically relevant terms couldn't be analyzed *at all*, then attempts to define them ought to have simply failed and run up against a wall. We shouldn't have even known how to *begin* the analysis of knowledge. But as it is, it's seemed that analysis has succeeded in generating meaningful discussion and even partial definitions (e.g. 'knowledge is true belief plus X'), even where final consensus hasn't yet emerged. So, primitivity doesn't seem to be a plausible explanation for the slow pace of analysis, at least in many cases.

Another point is that one would not expect consensus to arise in a field that studies controversial topics. After all, philosophy is in part about the meaning of life. Everyone has practical and probably emotional stakes in questions regarding God's existence, the meaning of it all, the afterlife, the morality of XYZ, the nature of morality in general, and so on. Why should we expect consensus to develop in such a field, when we can't even collectively agree on relatively straightforward questions like 'How do we balance the budget'? One might object that though personal stakes might play a role in some philosophical debates, other debates seem so abstract and anodyne that it is very

44 Ichikawa and Steup, 2018

unlikely that personal involvement could be a relevant factor. How could bias incline one towards a certain position in the philosophy of mathematics, for instance?

But it is not so clear that abstract controversies are unrelated to the more blatantly divisive topics. Consider the doctrine of mathematical Platonism: while not likely to inspire campus protests *in itself*, the doctrine does lend plausibility to Platonism more generally, which lends plausibility to the existence of non-material things, which discredits materialism, which is a cornerstone of many worldviews. And consider that many philosophers tend to accept the same corresponding clusters of doctrines regarding abstract and practical topics, despite the surface unrelatedness of the various views. For instance, theists are often less amenable to nominalism than non-theists, and naturalists more amenable to moral anti-realism than non-naturalists.[45] Strictly speaking, there is no absolute reason why this *has* to be the case – many theists have accepted nominalism in the past, and many naturalists have accepted moral realism. But the positions nonetheless covary, and a plausible explanation is that deep down, the positions really do relate in some way.

To be sure, personal involvement cannot be the sole explanation for the pervasiveness of philosophical disagreement, but it is not a variable that can be overlooked, and it may go a long way towards explaining why there is widespread disagreement regarding the philosophical analyses of terms like 'good' or 'justice'.

There are also two methodological factors that might be important. First, as is now widely recognized, many concepts do not have 'classical structure'.[46] That is, many terms do not have any crisp set of necessary and sufficient conditions which determine application. (Note that the absence of classical structure does not imply that a term is

45 Bourget and Chalmers, 2014
46 Margolis and Laurence, 1999

primitive: 'game' may not have a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but it's still complex.) Consider 'vegetable'. Conceptually, there is no one set of features that will confer 'vegetablehood' upon an object. When trying to determine vegetablehood, we look for statistically-weighted cues, or for ways in which an object conforms to a prototypical or stereotypical vegetable. For instance, we might look for greenness, crunchiness, non-sweetness, or healthiness, and call any object which ticks a sufficient number of boxes a vegetable.[47] With this in mind, philosophers sometimes assume that terms do (or even *must*) have crisp, classical definitions; they take essentialism to an extreme. But perhaps some philosophical concepts don't have classical structure. Perhaps 'knowledge' is like 'vegetable', in that we should not expect to find a classical definition that works in all cases. If so, it should be no wonder that so many analyses of knowledge have failed; they would have been looking for a Holy Grail which is not to be found. (Which is not to say it'd become fruitless to investigate the complex ways in which the concept is applied.)

Second, we can turn the Argument from Bad Precedent on its head: some philosophers have presumed primitivism, so maybe the assumption is itself a factor that has limited analysis. The thought becomes more convincing when one considers that the assumption seems to have been accepted without much obvious argument, and that proposals like Strawson's haven't been given much attention.

To conclude this section, even if one were convinced that non-primitivist conceptual analysis were flawed and incapable of creating consensus, one ought to consider what non-analytical primitivism would put in its place. As noted previously, primitives cannot be identified except by intuition, and, as noted, primitivists

47 See Pinker, 1997, Chapter 2, for an explanation of these and related concepts. I credit Pinker for the 'vegetable' example.

themselves do not themselves agree on what the primitives are. So, the posit of primitives doesn't seem to be a good way to make up for the messiness and lack of consensus created by non-reductive analysis. The inability to produce universally accepted results is probably as good an argument against primitivism as for it.

Chapter 3. Arguments Against Primitivism

Let's turn to my positive case against primitives. Remember that a term is primitive if, and only if, one, and only one consideration (which is non-decomposable), determines its proper application, *and* one need not understand any other term in order to understand the putative primitive. Upon closer inspection, primitivism seems unlikely. My case is as follows: first, there aren't any obvious primitives; second, it's hard to see how a primitivist could explain the existence of incompatible terms; and third, primitivism can't account for nonsense, or for why propositions are only put together in certain ways.

3.1. There Are No Convincing Primitives

As noted in the first chapter, primitivists do not agree on what the primitive concepts are. Some think the primitives are sense ideas, other abstract terms, others both. This disagreement is puzzling if there really are any good examples of primitives. Why would there be disagreement if any concepts really were transparently unanalyzable?

Putting this aside, I have already critiqued the idea that sensibilia (which probably aren't 'concepts' at all) are primitive. To recap, it seems implausible that our concepts of colors, shapes, smells, sounds, flavors, and musical tones are undefinable

and isolated, since they have both intermodal relations (i.e. relations across sense modalities; e.g. they are all concepts of sensibilia), and intramodal relations (i.e. within sense modalities; e.g. red is more like pink than like green). Moreover, all sensibilia seem spatially located, possibly as a precondition for experience (if Kant is to be believed). Moreover, feelings like pain, pleasure, happiness, sadness, and joy have been analyzed extensively by numerous figures across the history of philosophy, and seem to be connected with other concepts, such as those of connation and value. We would normally be confused if someone said he was jumping up and down with joy because he was sad. In general, it seems that there are bounds to what we may meaningfully assert about feelings and sensibilia, so it'd seem that they must have some semantic connections, in virtue of which their various relations make sense or fail to make sense. (I will address the objection that their connections are non-semantic later.)

So, moving on: 'rationalist' primitivists claim that abstracta like 'existence' or 'cause' are primitive. But these concepts fare no better than the concepts of sensibilia, as far as simplicity and analyzability go. Cause and effect seem conceptually connected, as do activity, passivity, and events. Likewise, modal terms like 'necessity', 'possibility', 'actuality', and 'contingency' seem interrelated; it's not clear that one could fully understand what it meant to be 'necessary' if one did not understand what it meant to be 'possible'. 'Number' seems definable, since mathematics is arguably an explication of it; and one may perform countless inferences on the basis of one's understanding of terms like 'one,' 'many,' and 'totality'. Similarly, 'truth,' which Asay calls primitive, stands in a privileged relation to words like 'belief' and 'proposition,' which would be odd if it were semantically isolated.[48] And the word 'good' isn't very plausibly primitive

48 Asay, 2013

either, since it stands in direct relationships with concepts like 'bad', 'pleasure', 'morality', and 'desire'. Likewise, 'substance', 'property', 'attribute', and 'mode' seem interdefinable, and as to 'being' and 'existence', very respectable thinkers once believed that they were inherently connected with 'good', 'true', and 'one', and that these concepts run through all other concepts, as 'transcendentals' of being. More generally, being and existence have lain at the heart of numerous philosophical projects, from Aristotle's *Categories* to Heidegger's *Being and Time*.

I haven't gone through every possible 'rationalist' primitive, but it should be apparent what I'd say: any abstract notion which is a plausible subject of metaphysical speculation or enquiry seems plausibly analyzable in a non-primitivist fashion. After all, what would metaphysicians or ontologists be doing, if not mapping out relations among such concepts (or the things represented by them)? (Of course, one may object that metaphysical work consists not of analyzing the meanings of concepts, but of intuiting synthetic, necessary truths. I will address this contention later.)

3.2. You Can't Say No to Contradiction

The second problem for primitivism is that it is hard to see how non-arbitrarily contradictory terms could exist, if all terms resolved into primitives. (Note that I am not here arguing against every possible primitivism: if one allows some basic interdefinables to exist, perhaps one can resolve this problem.) Suppose that something like Leibniz's (apparent) decompositional theory were true, and concepts resolved into primitives like so:

*n*th Level	etc.
3rd Level.	ABCD ABCE ABDE ADEF etc.
2nd Level	ABC ABD ABE DEC BED etc.

1st Level	AB	AC	AD	AE	BE	etc.	
Bedrock	A	B	C	D	E	F	G

Because the bedrock is entirely primitive and positive, there ought to be no limit to how the concepts could be combined, as Leibniz takes pains to show.[49] But, given this, how could any concepts become incompatible? Seemingly, a complex's *not containing* a primitive is distinct from its *excluding* that primitive. I am free to say that something is both ABCD and ABCE, though the one lacks E and the other lacks D. Predicating both of a single subject might be redundant (why not say the subject is ABCDE?) but this is distinct from saying something contradictory. So, whence does the possibility of incompatibility arise? How can we ever reach contradictions, like 'red is green', or 'the number five is chilly'?

One might attempt to introduce exclusion stipulations at higher levels. (This will be connected, of course, with the notion of synthetic or a-posteriori necessities.) For instance, one might say that ABCD might also include 'not-E', thus making it incompatible with ABCE. A difficulty for this is that it would seem to make incompatibility purely arbitrary and not based upon the *positive* character of any term. 'Elephant' would include 'not-reptile', but not in virtue of any of elephant's positive characteristics; 'red' would be incompatible with 'green', but not because the concepts in any sense negated each other *qua* positive concepts. There would be nothing *incoherent* or *unthinkable* about a red-green; it would just happen to be the case that we arbitrarily combined concepts in such a way that some complex concepts contained

49 Russell, 1900, pg. 21-24

'red' and 'not-green'. 'Red' and 'green' would remain *fundamentally* compatible, on this scheme.

A powerful bit of evidence for the reality of the difficulty is that Leibniz himself (and Russell, in interpreting him[50]) seems to have recognized it:

> "It is as yet unknown to men, whence arises the incompossibility of diverse things, or how it can happen that diverse essences are opposed to each other, seeing that all purely positive terms seem to be compatible inter se."[51]

I do not know of Leibniz having explicitly posited a solution to this problem, nor have I seen any other proposed solutions.[52] Of course, I won't say that there isn't one, but it seems to me that the possibility of (seemingly) contradictory positive predicates is an unsolved problem for primitivists.

3.3. Making (Non)sense with Primitives

The third problem, which underlies the other two, is that concepts can only combine in certain ways if they are to create meaningful sentences; but this is not obviously explicable if their meanings are simple or understood on their own.

As a preliminary, first note that if 'understanding' a concept means being able to use it, as seems plausible, and using it involves propositions or propositional attitudes, then one cannot understand concepts on their own, because one cannot form coherent propositions about a concept in the absence of other concepts to which one could relate it. In short, 'intelligible on its own' seems to be a contradiction. In what sense does one understand a concept, if one can say nothing about it, know nothing about it, and believe nothing about it?

50 Russell, 1900 pg. 21-23
51 Quoted in Mates, 1989, pg. 76
52 See D'Agostino, 1976, for discussion.

Putting that aside, note that meaningless sentences cannot be true or false. Hence, a sentence like 'Green is red' must be determined to be meaningful before we can raise the issue of its truth or falsity. (And it is not obvious that it is meaningful.) Now, its meaningfulness will be determined solely by virtue of the concepts it is relating, it would seem. We eventually have to just *see* whether the concepts can relate as is desired, or else we would never understand any propositions we could evaluate as true or false in the first place. So, there is a distinction between sentences that assert necessary falsehoods, and ones that 'assert' incoherencies.

Now, the facts that determine how a concept may be meaningfully related to other concepts will apparently be semantic facts, i.e. facts about what the terms mean. Because concepts will relate in differing ways to various other concepts, there will be multiple semantic facts that determine the proper application of any given concept. If A and B are basic, and A can stand in relation R to B, then something about A and B permits them to stand in this relation. If A can similarly stand in relation R* to C, then something about both A and C allows this, as well. The semantic 'somethings', whatever they are, will lie in (or be facts about) the meaning of A. And there will always be many relations possessed by any given concept; so, there will be multiple semantic facts about any given concept. So, it does not seem that any concept can be semantically simple. That is, before I discuss whether 'Green isn't necessarily a color' could be true, or whether 'The nothing nothings' could be true, I must first ascertain that these are not pseudo-sentences – which is impossible if we can't semantically analyze the requisite terms because they 'primitive'. If primitives can't be analyzed, we can't know how to apply them or assert anything about them, since we won't know how to fit them

together into meaningful propositions. So, the existence of primitives seems implausible.

3.4. Objections

I'll now address some objections.

3.4.1. But Are the Relations Necessary?

One might say that I've only shown that there must be relations among concepts, not that there must be *necessary* relations. But given that a term's relations are not necessary (e.g. that 'red' is only contingently connected with 'color'), it seems that a term could retain its identity across changes in its relations. So, its relations seem to be in some sense irrelevant to its meaning.

But I've not been arguing about necessity; I've been arguing about meaning. A term's meaning is what lets it be meaningfully connected with other terms. This is the case whether one believes in metaphysical necessity, synthetic a-prioris, or whatever. Indeed, maybe 'red' could have been a prime number, thus making it conceivable that 'Red is a prime number' could be meaningful. Maybe there is some part of any given concept that is purely monadic; however, the overall meaning of the concept has to include relations, or something semantic that determines the relations, such that we can analyze the concepts and determine whether a sentence is meaningful enough to be true or false in the first place.

3.4.2. Ineffable Concepts

Another critique might be that perhaps we *do* have concepts that we can't relate to other concepts, and that we just can't use them, talk about them, or think about them. Perhaps they are 'dormant', in some sense. My reply is that yes, perhaps there

are such things. But in that case, I will just amend my thesis to extend only to non-dormant concepts – i.e. all ones we actually talk about or use. Given my dialectical aims, which are ultimately to (a) show that 'a-priori' propositions are analytic, and (b) to diffuse appeals to primitivity in philosophical discussions, I am unconcerned with the concepts we don't talk about and can't use. (Also, given the typical meaning of 'concept', it's not even clear that there could be dormant concepts – what would it mean to have a concept one could never use or think about?)

3.4.3. Semantics

One might wonder whether I've not been using an overly broad notion of 'meaning' or of the 'semantic value' of concepts. Aren't there other ways of cashing out 'meaning' so as to make meanings plausibly simple, undefinable, isolated? It seems that I'm treating meaning as if it's *just* facts about use. But doesn't a concept need to have to have an 'intrinsic' meaning before it can have relations or usages at all? Doesn't it need something monadic, which might be simple or ineffable, upon which the concept's relations and use contingently 'supervene'?

First, consider whether we could talk about a purely simple or monadic meaning. I don't think we obviously could. First, what would we say about it? Saying anything about it implies it having some semantic relation to something else. That is, calling the meaning of a concept purely intrinsic or monadic creates a 'beetle-in-the-box' problem.[53] If there's some simple, ineffable, undefinable monadic 'core' of a concept which does not relate in any way to its relations or its use, how do we communicate about it? What would it mean for there to be a concept 'five' that isn't just

53 Wittgenstein, 2009 / 1953

the concept of the number between four and six, which is prime, and so on? The assumption seems to be that the meaning of a concept is something like a (naively interpreted) sensory image or experience: I have an inner vision of the simple reality of some concept, therefore its meaning is intelligible on its own.

This picture of concepts is not self-evidently accurate. First, I can know the meaning of 'chiliagon', though I can't imagine a chiliagon. Similarly, I can understand the concept of 'necessity' though I cannot straightforwardly 'see' a necessity. Second, we can be wrong about which meanings we understand: it is not clear whether it is contradictory or coherent to believe in evil but also a perfectly omniscient, omnibenevolent, omnipotent God. The best test for whether one understands a concept is not one's intuition that one 'gets' it, but that one can use it well; that one can articulate sensible claims about necessity, elephants, colors, and so forth. Third, the connection between phenomenal experience and concepts isn't obvious. It seems plausible that a congenitally blind color scientist could have a concept of color, and that her concept would not be totally equivocal in meaning to the concept had by a sighted person.

Finally, if one claimed that the meaning of a concept were monadic, but that its relations or use superevened *necessarily* upon this monadic core, then one would be quibbling about the meaning of 'meaning'. If a concept has its necessary conceptual relations or use *in virtue* of its monadic core, then it seems reasonable to say that truths based on its relations or use are in some non-vapid sense 'semantic'. And remember that there is no straightforward sense in which we may 'understand' a concept in isolation.

3.4.4. Am I Attacking a Strawman?

One might reply that I must be construing primitivism uncharitably or attacking a strawman, given how obviously absurd it'd be to say terms are could be utterly unrelated in the way I have described. I grant that primitivism might seem almost trivially false, but I hope it doesn't seem that I've been engaged in an utterly trivial project, for it seems to me that primitivism is only implausible in retrospect. In my experience, many people do agree with the claim that 'Analysis has to end *somewhere*' and many are comfortable with concluding that one cannot define or further explain the most basic ideas. After all, some authors explicitly voice agreement with primitivism,[54] and P.F. Strawson took the time to suggest an alternative to it.[55]

That said, I agree that it would be good to construe primitivism in a more plausible fashion. The problem is that it's hard to see what else everyday primitivists could mean by calling terms 'undefinable' or 'unanalyzable'. I say 'everyday' because I'll grant that maybe I am misinterpreting historical figures like Russell, when they say things like the following:

> Definition, as is evident, is only possible in respect of complex ideas. It consists, broadly speaking, in the analysis of complex ideas into their simple constituents. Since one idea can only be defined by another, we should incur a vicious regress if we did not admit some indefinable ideas.[56]

If no great thinkers would endorse primitivism, then I am nonetheless interested in the vulgar primitivism I encounter 'on the streets.' One might respond that I should ask the

54 Asay, 2013
55 Strawson, 1992
56 Russell, 1900 pg. 21

vulgar primitivists, then, what they mean. After all, I've claimed that I am not attacking a strawman.

But this is precisely the problem: the position is an unconscious assumption, not a doctrine, and it's precisely my point that it *isn't* a very meaningful position, when one stops to think about it. To say that a concept is just unanalyzable or a 'rugged individualist' doesn't make sense, so it *shouldn't* seem sensible once it's described in more detail. I suspect that people are willing to endorse primitivism precisely because they haven't thought about it very much. (After all, everyone has countless unconscious philosophical assumptions, and the best of us fail to examine them all.)

That said, let's review again what it could mean for concepts to be (a) unanalyzable, (b) simple, or (c) semantically isolated. If anyone can come up with a more charitable interpretation of the implicit theory behind primitivist practice (i.e. refusing to describe the meaning of 'unanalyzable' terms), I welcome the insight.

(a) Unanalyzable

No genus-species structure: If one means that not everything can be analyzed in terms of genus and species, then I grant that this is probably correct. Note, however, that some primitivists claim that certain concepts are primitive which seemingly *could* be analyzed in genus-species terms, such as 'red'; red may be analyzed as a color, a property, empirically-accessible, and so on. So, this isn't what *all* primitivists have in mind.

Phenomenal experiences: By 'undefinable', one could mean that certain terms can't be understood or communicated unless one has had some particular phenomenal experience or 'idea' (whether in the imagination or in experience) that reveals to one

the *true* content of the concept. This is, again, to invoke something like an imagist theory of thought. It's problematic because it's not clear that the meaning of a concept is a mental image, especially in the cases of things that can't be straightforwardly imagined (e.g. 'existence', 'necessity'). So, the incommunicability of images or experiences doesn't obviously have a bearing on whether concepts are definable or analyzable. Moreover, even if there were a sense in which some people (e.g. the congenitally blind) couldn't form certain concepts, this would not show that the concepts themselves were unanalyzable or ineffable, but only that certain people were disadvantaged in respect to them.

Ostension. If one meant that certain concepts can only be made understood by ostension or example, then will have made the same essential claim as the previous; one will have claimed that only by some particular experience will one be able to understand what a term means. And the same problem arises: how one receives a concept, and whether one *can* receive it at all, doesn't seem to have a straightforward bearing on whether the concept is analyzable in itself.

Alternatively, one might mean that in some cases, it's simply impossible to abstract any pattern from a set of examples. But while perhaps *in principle* some patterns can be recognized but not articulated (anything's possible), this seems very implausible.

(b) Simple

Decomposability: By 'simplicity', one could mean that certain concepts cannot be 'broken down' into more basic units. If this is the case, then there's no apparent disagreement on the table. I agree that some concepts are more basic than others, and

that some can't be decomposed into more basic units. 'Cause' and 'effect' are more central to our conception of the world than 'firetruck', and there probably isn't a sense in which either of them can be further analyzed in a non-relational fashion. That said, this reasonable claim about simplicity doesn't make sense of the primitivist tendency to think that the meanings of some concepts are 'self-evident' and 'unanalyzable' such that they can be understood on their own. Even concepts that are 'simple' in the reasonable sense stand in complex, multifarious relationships with other concepts, and we can seemingly explicate these relations. After all, what would it mean to understand the concept of 'cause' if one didn't understand the concept of 'effect'?

Individuating condition: By 'simplicity', one might mean that there is some simple principle in a concept, which gives it its identity. But provided this simple principle isn't its meaning overall, this doesn't conflict with my thesis.

(c) Semantically Isolated

Mental Images: One might think that because one can form a mental image in isolation, that one can have a certain concept in isolation. The problem is that the ability to have a sensory image which is in some sense isolated (it's not obvious in what sense this could be; color images seem to present colors spatially, for instance) doesn't seem to be the same as having a concept.

Doesn't need other concepts to be intelligible. One might think that if one possessed only the one concept in question, one could nonetheless understand it. But to repeat, given that 'understanding' means knowing how to use a concept, and that it's far from obvious what it would mean to 'use' an isolated concept, this seems rather dubious.

Independently thought about: By 'semantically isolated', one might mean that a term can be 'thought about' in isolation from other terms. But it's dubious as to whether we can genuinely 'think about' concepts in isolation from other concepts. What I suspect is happening when one imagines that one is doing so is that one is picturing a word or other representation of some concept, and intuiting that one understands the concept. The problem is that such intuitions can and often are plainly wrong. I remember as an undergraduate that I used to read existentialist literature and think that I knew what I was reading, but I later realized that I was just skimming over words and experiencing 'warm fuzzy feelings' because of any given work's apparent profundity. Likewise, consider that there's a sense in which I might persuade myself that I can 'think about' round-squares, which can't exist; in fact, I'm probably just thinking about the words 'round-square', even if I might have believed I was considering 'round-squares' themselves. And consider: it is difficult to see how the concept of a 'barber who shaves all those and only those who don't shave themselves' is incoherent. I might read the previous sentence, think I knew what such a barber would be, but be wrong. In short, the real test for whether someone understands or can think about a concept would seem to be that he or she can use the concept properly. Inner visions don't seem to be a good source of data regarding what we do or don't understand.

Must be accepted as givens. One might say that some concepts must be simply accepted as meaningful, regardless of whether they have been defined. But this isn't contrary to the Strawsonian thesis; nobody is claiming that terms aren't meaningful prior to analysis, or that it's not fair to use terms one hasn't yet defined. We obviously must do so in order to conduct any analysis at all; there is a distinction between an

implicit and explicit understanding of a concept, in the manner in which there is a distinction between implicit and explicit understanding of grammar.

Meaning can only be intuited. One could mean that certain terms just can't be explained, and must only be intuited for their hidden meaning. That is, there may indeed be correct application conditions for them, but they escape our ability to articulate them. Some might be tempted to point to Wittgenstein's example of 'game' as a term that resists analysis. But note first that 'game' isn't simple or primitive, so inexplicability can't be a sufficient condition for primitivity. And game does seem explainable, albeit not with a classical definition; one might, for instance, study and weigh the various factors which people tend to consider when using the word. (To what degree of importance do people think that games must be fun, for instance?) Second, note that it's difficult to see how we could learn to use a truly unexplainable concept. How could we acquire our intuitions regarding its proper application, if the concept weren't being given to us from on high? And if we could never discern a pattern lying behind the usage of the concept, we might just be tempted to say that the concept in question was in fact a pseudo-concept or mere word, i.e. that it was meaningless. Anyhow, the fact that the human mind is not equipped to find a pattern isn't the same as the pattern being undiscoverable in itself, though admittedly if we couldn't ourselves see the pattern present in our use of a concept, that would be fairly discouraging.

3.5. Summary

Note that I'm not claiming to have definitively 'refuted' primitivism. I'm only suggesting, for the sake of discussion, that the notion of 'unanalyzability' seems problematic, and that in retrospect it's not even clear what it could mean. To ensure clarity, I'll summarize the overall problem and my case regarding it before concluding.

According to some philosophers, basic concepts cannot be analyzed, because their meanings involve no inherent semantic connections with other concepts. They say that these terms are 'ineffable', 'unanalyzable', 'undefinable', 'simple', 'primitive', 'atomic', 'you know it or you don't', 'self evident in meaning', or 'just obvious'. Examples are thought to include 'red', 'being', 'truth', 'cause', and 'pain'. I call this assumption 'primitivism'. I think that the assumption cannot be right, for three reasons:

First, it seems to me that we *can* analyze the putative primitives: for instance, it seems that 'red' must be a 'color', that it's more like 'pink' than 'green', that it ought to be predicated of spatial things, etc. And terms like 'being', 'truth', 'cause', and 'existence' seem to be precisely what metaphysicians analyze.

Second, it seems to me that true primitives couldn't be *incompatible* with any other concepts, e.g. that 'red' and 'green' ought to be compatible with each other, since they would be purely positive, purely monadic concepts. But it seems that there are incompatible terms, which suggests that at least some basic terms are not isolated.

Third, we must recognize meaning before we can decide upon truth. Because there are multiple semantic facts about how any concept can be related, there must be multiple facets or aspects to any given concept which explain how it may be used in certain ways but not others. So, terms are not simple in meaning. Also, it's not even clear what it'd mean to 'understand' a term in isolation. Conceptual competence seems to involve something like knowing how to put terms together; what would it mean to understand a term 'in itself'?

Conclusion: Back to Socrates

Philosophical pieces are often either constructive or destructive in their aims, written with the intention of either toppling a theory or explicating one. In this paper, I have aimed to critique a theory, but my end was ultimately constructive, I hope. Having unconsciously assumed a questionable picture of analysis, it's plausible that we've been limiting ourselves by overlooking the importance of non-decompositional approaches to analysis like Strawson's. Surely, 'knowledge' is something like justified true belief. But what exactly are the relations among 'justified', 'true', and 'belief'? How do they form a unitary phenomenon? Is 'knowledge' simply an arbitrary agglomeration, susceptible to purely decompositional analysis? Or are there interesting patterns to be observed in the relationships among the pertinent concepts? By suggesting that primitivism is not obviously true, I hope to have provided support for the relevance of Strawson's alternative approach.

To wrap up, I'll briefly return to my motivation for pursuing this line of thought. One trivial motivation is that I don't like it when someone tells me that a term just can't be defined and that it's pointless to try to deepen one's understanding of it. I've found that some of the most important advances in my own thought have occurred because I stopped and thought, 'But what do I really mean by X?'. In my opinion, 'What is X' questions are valuable and in fact probably one of the central aims of philosophy, so I don't like assumptions that shut such questions down.

Second, I would like to support the claim that meaning is what grounds the truths of 'a-priori' propositions like, 'Murder is wrong' or 'Cause necessitates effect.' Others have claimed that such propositions are 'synthetic a-priori' or 'necessary a-

posteriori' truths, and wish to distance themselves from the purely analytical approach I would like to take. I have not explained my thoughts on this topic in this thesis (not explicitly, anyhow), but I'd like to suggest that the thesis is relevant to them. If we take concepts and percepts to be our modes of access to the world, and can clarify how they relate to reality, I wonder whether we might (a) ground the truth of 'necessary' and 'a-priori' propositions upon semantics, while (b) grounding semantics upon what exists in the world, therefore overcoming the prejudice that 'analytical' or 'semantic' truths are trivial tautologies. If the meanings of our concepts determine proper application, and the world determines meaning, then there's a way, to my mind, in which the gap between 'analytical' and 'synthetic' truth might be somewhat bridged. I suppose to some extent I'm ultimately interested in resuscitating a broadly Aristotelian epistemology, which bases our concepts on the natures of things. How one might take such an approach is beyond the ken of this paper, but it's a project I'd like to apply myself to, and I think it'd be a relevant way in which one might follow up on the topic of this thesis.

Bibliography

Asay, J. (2013). *The Primitivist Theory of Truth*. Cambridge University Press.

Banicki, K. (2012). Connective Conceptual Analysis and Psychology. *Theory and Psychology*, *22*(3), 310-323.

Bourget, D., & Chalmers, D.J. (2014). What do Philosophers Believe?. *Philosophical Studies*, *170*(3), 465-500.

Carnap, R. (1959). "The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language". In A. J. Ayer, ed., *Logical Positivism*. Glencoe, Ill. The Free Press, 60-81. (Original work published in 1931).

D'Agostino, F. B. (1976). Leibniz on Compossibility and Relational Predicates. *The Philosophical Quarterly (1950-)*, *26*(103), 125-138.

Descartes, R. (2017). "Correspondence Between Descartes and Princess Elizabeth."(J. Bennett, Ed.) Original work published in 1643. Retrieved from https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1643_1.pdf

Dutant, J. (2015). The Legend of the Justified True Belief Analysis. *Philosophical Perspectives*, *29*(1), 95-145.

Feser, E. (2009). *Aquinas*. Oneworld Publications.

Fodor, J. (1994). "Concepts: A Potboiler." *Cognition*, *50*(1-3), 95-113.

Fodor, J. A. (1998). *Concepts: Where Cognitive Science Went Wrong*. Oxford University Press.

Gettier, E. L. (1963). Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?. *Analysis*, *23*(6), 121-123.

Heidegger, M. (1973). *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson. Blackwell. (Original work published in 1927).

Huemer, M. (2015) "The Failure of Analysis and the Nature of Concepts." In C. Daly (Ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Philosophical Methods*, 51-76. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ichikawa, J.J., & Steup, M. (2018). "The Analysis of Knowledge", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/knowledge-analysis/>.

Klein, P. (1998). Foundationalism and the Infinite Regress of Reasons. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *58*(4), 919-925.

Lewis, D. (1983). New Work for a Theory of Universals. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *61*(4), 343-377.

Locke, J. (2017). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. (J. Bennett, Ed.). Original work published in 1689. Retrieved from http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/

Lodge, P., & Puryear, S. (2006). Unconscious Conceiving and Leibniz's Argument for Primitive Concepts. *Studia Leibnitiana*, 177-196.

Loemaker, L.E. (ed.) (1989). *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*. Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Margolis, E., & Laurence, S. (Eds.). (1999). *Concepts: Core Readings*. MIT Press.

Mates, B. (1989). *The Philosophy of Leibniz: Metaphysics and Language*. Oxford University Press on Demand.

Maudlin, T. (2007). *The Metaphysics Within Physics*. Oxford University Press.

McGinn, C. (2000). *Logical Properties: Identity, Existence, Predication, Necessity, Truth*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

Moore, G.E. (1959). *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge University Press. Original work published in 1903.

Myrdal, P., & Repo, A. (2016), Leibniz on Primitive Concepts and Conceiving Reality. *De Natura Rerum*, *38*, 148-166.

Pinker, S. (2007). *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window Into Human Nature*. Penguin.

Plaisted, D. (2003). Leibniz's Argument for Primitive Concepts. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, *41*(3), 329-341.

Robinson, R. (1965). *Definition*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press.

Russell, B. (1900). *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Russell, B. (1919). *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*. London: Allen and Unwin.

Strawson, P.F. (1973). Different Conceptions of Analytical Philosophy. *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, *35*(4), 800-834.

Strawson, P.F. (1992). *Analysis and Metaphysics: An Introduction to Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.

Szubka, T. (1998). Connective Analysis and Basic Concepts. *Philosophia*, *26*(1-2), 141-150.

Tarski, A., (1941 / 1994). *Introduction to Logic and to the Methodology of the Deductive Sciences*. Oxford University Press.

Williamson, T. (2002). *Knowledge and its Limits*. Oxford University Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (2009). *Philosophical Investigations*. John Wiley & Sons. (Original work published in 1953).