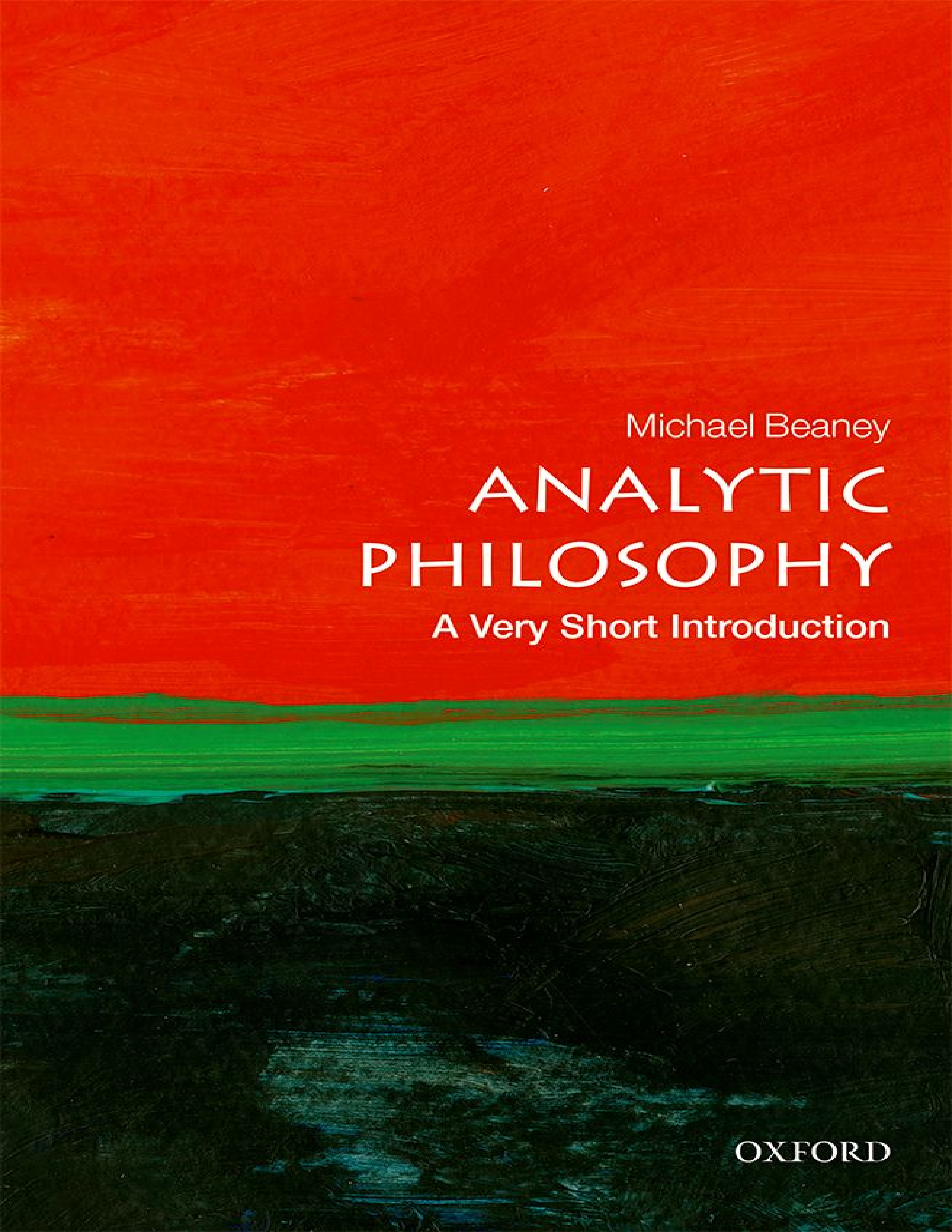

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Michael Beaney

ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD
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Preface and acknowledgements

This is a book that I have wanted to write for quite a while—a book that seeks to introduce analytic philosophy to those beginning their study of philosophy, and to anyone interested in knowing what has been going on in philosophy over the last century or so and what 'analytic philosophy', in particular, means. But it was only once I had finished editing *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy*, which was published in 2013, that I felt ready to do so. The *Handbook* contains thirty-nine chapters, covering the whole history of analytic philosophy from its origins in the 19th century to the most recent work, across as many fields as it was possible to include in a single volume. In email correspondence with the contributors in planning the volume and in reading their chapters, I gained a stronger sense of what analytic philosophy involves, and of both its strengths and weaknesses. Some, perhaps all, may disagree with one or more features of the account that I offer here; but I would like to thank them all—as well as the many others with whom I have discussed analytic philosophy over the years—for helping to shape my views. Naming them all here would conflict with the very shortness of this introduction, but I did so in my preface to the *Handbook*.

I lectured on early analytic philosophy in Peking University in the winter semester of 2011, and have taught further courses and given talks on analytic philosophy at various other universities in China since then. I was struck by the keen interest in analytic philosophy that has been growing rapidly in China in recent years, and I learnt a lot, not just about what needs explaining by the challenging questions I was asked, but also about Chinese ways of thinking. I have partly written this book with a Chinese audience in mind, in the hope that it will contribute to deepening the dialogue with Chinese ideas and philosophers—and non-Western thinking, generally—that is very much needed today.

As I was preparing the final version of this book, I was giving an introductory lecture course on analytic philosophy at the Humboldt University of Berlin, open to all students of the university and the wider public, and drawing on ideas in this book. Teaching and working in a bilingual context has also helped me appreciate what aspects of analytic philosophy need explaining, defending, and criticizing. I would like to thank all my students—both in Berlin and in all the other places I have taught, mainly in England, over the last thirty years—for providing the stimulus to my teaching and writing about analytic philosophy. In my introductory chapter to the *Handbook*, I offered a gloss on the lines from Alexander Pope that I also quote in Chapter 3 of the present book: if an idea is worth thinking, then it is worth saying clearly; and if it is said clearly, then it will crystallize thinking in others. The sentiment expressed here has always informed my teaching and writing, and I have sought to realize it here.

I have had excellent support and encouragement from the staff at OUP. Andrea Keegan read two early drafts of the first chapters and the original proposal, and was extremely helpful in suggesting how it could be improved. Jenny Nugee steered it through the final stages, Erica Martin organized the illustrations, and Klara Smith drew the pictures that I am delighted to have in the book. Two anonymous external readers read the Introduction and first two chapters at proposal stage, and one of them also read the whole version at the penultimate stage, as did a further reader from OUP. Joy Mellor did a

very efficient job as copy-editor, as did Dorothy McCarthy in proof-reading and Saraswathi Ethiraju in overseeing the production of the book. I would like to thank all of them for their contribution to its final form.

Various family members and friends have also read drafts of chapters of this book at different stages. I am especially grateful to Sharon Macdonald, our three children Harriet, Thomas, and Tara, Bob Clark, and Anna Bellomo for comments. I also thank Sharon for taking the photo that appears in Chapter 6 and Cate Kay for allowing the use of her car. I dedicate this book to my present and future grandchildren—to Iris, to the new one on the way as I write, and to those that may come along later (who knows?). It distils a lot of what I have thought about over the last forty years, and, indeed, of me—and I hope that this book, at least, will be short enough for them to read it when their intellectual curiosity is aroused.

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Sharon Macdonald.

Introduction

Many professional philosophers working today would describe themselves as ‘analytic philosophers’. Certainly, this is true of many philosophers teaching in colleges and universities in the English-speaking world. But analytic philosophy has been growing rapidly elsewhere: one sign of this is the establishment over the last twenty years or so of societies for analytic philosophy right across the world, from East Asia to Latin America. This is not to say that there is agreement on what ‘analytic philosophy’ means or what its main concerns, methods, and successes are. But I hope that this book will give you some idea of what it involves and of its achievements and strengths, as well as of its limitations and weaknesses.

One claim that is often made about analytic philosophy is that it places great emphasis on clarity, precision, and rigour: clarity of thinking, precision of expression, and rigour of argumentation. Analytic philosophers try to get as clear as they can about the philosophical issues that they address, to express their ideas as precisely as possible (using both ordinary language and technical vocabulary, as appropriate), and to present their arguments with the maximum degree of rigour (often using formal logic). I think that clarity, precision, and rigour are indeed cardinal intellectual virtues, and I have attempted to embody them in this book (though I have minimized the use of formal logic). How successful I have been will be for you to judge. But even if I have not been as successful as I would have liked, I hope that you will at least see why these virtues are prized.

Clarity, precision, and rigour are not the only intellectual virtues, however. Creativity, fruitfulness, and systematicity are just three others that might be mentioned. I think the best analytic philosophy also exhibits these virtues, although this might be better appreciated. All good philosophy, in my view, is *conceptually creative*: it gives us new conceptual resources to think more carefully and deeply about things, which can in turn lead to fruitful applications and the development of more systematic theories. Analytic philosophy has not been known for its system-building in the grand style of some of the philosophers of the past. On the contrary, it has often been associated with a piecemeal approach: small problems are broken off to be chewed away at one by one. The danger here is that it is then easy to lose sight of the wood for the trees, a criticism that might indeed be made of some analytic philosophy today. Yet the systematic nature of analytic philosophy and of its underlying motivations, in particular, also deserves greater recognition. So a further aim of the present book is to give some sense both of the conceptual creativity of analytic philosophy and of the bigger picture in which its fruitfulness and systematic ambitions can be appreciated.

Philosophical questions

One way to introduce analytic philosophy is to take the question that we will explore in detail in Chapter 1: how many things are there in the world? The question is easy to ask. As soon as a child has learnt to count and to use the words ‘thing’ and ‘world’, they might come up with it (most likely when they are being put to bed). But could such a question have an answer? Does it even make sense? The question is not an isolated example. There are many others. Where was I before I was conceived? How long did it take to create the world? Do numbers exist? Is ‘$2+2=4$’ true everywhere? Is ‘This sentence is false’ true or false? Do I have free will? All these questions are easy to ask, and it is natural to think that they must have answers, just because they are similar to questions that do have answers—‘Where was I before I moved to Berlin?’, ‘How long did it take to write this book?’, ‘Do pandas exist?’, and so on. But it is by no means obvious what the answers are, if indeed they do have answers.

If such questions do not have answers, then are they meaningless? They do not seem meaningless, since we understand the words used in asking them and the questions are grammatically well formed. And even if we described them as meaningless, this would only be the start of explaining why they are different from the similar questions that have straightforward answers. Why are they meaningless? What distinguishes them from the similar ones that do have meaning? What do we mean by ‘meaning’? What is the connection between having an answer and having a meaning?

Questions that do not admit of straightforward answers, and yet seem as if they should, are characteristic of philosophy. Some of them might indeed turn out to have answers, as science progresses to provide the conceptual resources and empirical data to do so. But others remain intractable and continue to give rise to philosophical puzzlement. Inventive ‘answers’ can always be offered. Where was I before I was conceived? A twinkle in my parents’ eyes? This is only a metaphor. In God’s mind? Here we would need some heavy-duty theology to fill this out, if it can be done at all. In the body of some other human or non-human animal who died before I was born? Here we would have to appeal to some doctrine of reincarnation.

Such inventive answers only highlight the oddity or intractability of the questions. Such questions have been asked throughout the history of human thought—indeed, as just suggested, many of them seem to arise naturally as soon as language has the relevant words and grammatical structure. Answers have also been given throughout the history of human thought, not least by philosophers, but it is only relatively recently—in the 20th century—that philosophers have approached these questions with attention to the workings of language and awareness of the multifarious ways in which language can mislead us. It is this approach that is characteristic of what has come to be called 'analytic philosophy', especially as it developed in the first half of the 20th century. We will address the question of how and why analytic philosophy acquired its name in the final chapter of this book, after we have seen some examples of what is involved. The obvious thing to say, though, is that analytic philosophy is called 'analytic' because of the emphasis placed on analysis. But this just raises the question of what is meant by 'analysis', and what forms of analysis are employed in analytic philosophy. This, too, is only best explained by examples, and we will consider a range of different examples in what follows.

Thought-thinking

In considering these examples, what I want to do, above all, is engage you in the *activity* of analytic philosophizing. Analytic philosophy has its fair share of intellectual landmarks. But my aim is not to be your guide on a sight-seeing tour but your minder (as it might best be called here!) on a thought-thinking trip. In seeking to engage you in actual philosophizing, I shall introduce you on the way to some of the key ideas of five of the founders of the analytic tradition: Gottlob Frege (1848–1925), Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), G. E. Moore (1873–1958), Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), and Susan Stebbing (1885–1943). Each of the main themes of the five chapters that follow has been chosen to do just this. But we will only explore those ideas that are relevant to the theme. The chapters should not be seen as giving a rounded account of their respective philosophies. We will encounter ideas of other philosophers, too, but in a book of this kind, it would be impossible to do justice to these as well. There are plenty of accounts of their ideas available, from summaries in encyclopedias to scholarly monographs. We will indulge in a little sight-seeing in the final chapter, though, and some suggestions for further reading are made at the end of this book.

Before we begin our trip, however, let me issue one piece of travel advice. If you are new to analytic philosophy, then you will not understand what we are doing without acquiring certain concepts. Without the relevant concepts, we cannot even think certain thoughts, so if the aim is to give you these thoughts, then the concepts must be grasped. Some of these concepts, such as the concept of an object's falling under a concept or the concept of being self-identical, may seem strange when first encountered, but they are relatively straightforward once explained. Others, such as the concept of a concept itself or the concept of meaning, may seem familiar, but they will need to be understood in more precise or technical ways. Other concepts may be entirely new, such as the concept of a transfinite number. So if, as you are reading this book, you do not initially grasp a concept, then be patient. Sometimes you may need to re-read a paragraph. Reading philosophy is not like reading a novel. You will have to slow down, re-read, and even stop at times to reflect before going on. Sometimes you will need to see what work the concept does before starting to grasp it, and then you can go back to the initial explanation to consolidate your understanding. As I said at the beginning, analytic philosophy—like all good philosophy—is conceptually creative, and like all good creative activities, its originality and value may not be immediately recognized. But if you persevere, then the richer conceptual resources and refined reasoning skills you will acquire will open up a whole new realm of intellectual thought.

Chapter 1

How many things are there?

How many things are there in the world? If you ask me how many children I have, I can immediately answer you: three. If you ask me how many books there are in my office, I could tell you, though I would have to count them. If you ask me how old I am in minutes, I could work it out, though I would have to check with my mother what precise time I was born. If you ask me how many cells I have in my body, I would have to consult a biologist and could only give an approximate answer, taking into account such factors as my weight. But can we answer the question ‘How many things are there *altogether* in the world?’ Could we count them all, at least in principle, or work it out? And if we couldn’t give the exact number, could we at least give an approximate answer?

Things and kinds of things

If we find the question ‘How many things are there in the world?’ intractable or perplexing or meaningless or plain silly, is it because the world is just too large to give any sensible answer? If so, then let us take a simpler question: How many things are there in my study? We might think that all I need to do here is look around and count them. I might start by counting my books. But if I now take one of these books, should I count each page separately? Should I also count the words on each page? Is my armchair one thing or two things —e.g., the wooden frame and the cushion—or many things? Is my desk one thing or five things (the top and the four legs into which it can be dismantled)? The question cannot be answered until we specify what *kinds of things* we have in mind. If *books* or *chairs* or *desks*—or indeed *books or chairs or desks* (taking them together)—are meant, then I can give you the answer, at least in principle, or approximately. But to ask how many things there are altogether, without such specification, seems to lack an answer.

But is the question therefore meaningless? In particular contexts, it may indeed have meaning. Imagine that I am moving house, and I phone up a removals company to request a quotation. As we go through the rooms one by one, I am asked how many things I have in my study. Here I might reply: ‘Well, I have about 1,000 books, one desk, three chairs, a sofa, an armchair, two filing cabinets, a coffee table, and five potted plants.’ It would be misleading to summarize this by saying that I have 1,014 things (adding them all up), but it is an appropriate reply. This only reinforces the point, though, that we need to specify the *kinds of things* that are meant in giving an answer to such a question. What the removals person meant by ‘things’ are all those physical objects that would need to be carried away, whether singly or packed up in boxes. In answering the question, I would have to specify the kinds of things relevant for providing a quotation—for example, to work out how many boxes would be needed for my books.

The context, then, can often make clear what kinds of things are meant in asking ‘How many things are there?’. If not, then all one can say is ‘It depends on what you mean by “thing” ’. That would place the onus on the questioner to specify what they meant. Returning now to the more general question ‘How many things are there in the world?’, it is hard to see what context might give such a question a clear enough sense to have an answer. But if it were indeed to have a sense, then it would have to be specified what kinds of things were meant (atoms? molecules? chemical elements?); and this is the crucial point.

This already illustrates one form that ‘analysis’ takes in philosophy. If it is not immediately obvious how to answer a given question, then we need to identify its possible meanings. Perhaps we will find the intended or relevant meaning by understanding the context; but if we don’t, and we want to explain how the question might therefore only *seem* meaningful, then we may need to *imagine* possible contexts in which the question has an answer. Only when we have established that none of these possible contexts is the actual context are we entitled to conclude that, on this occasion, the question is meaningless and hence unanswerable. Understood as just a form of words, any question may have multiple possible meanings, and analysis is required to distinguish the relevant ones. This is ‘analysis’ not in the crude sense of simply ‘decomposing’ something already given, but in the sense of identifying all the relevant possibilities—a process that requires imagination. Analysis is far more creative than is often thought.

Introducing Gottlob Frege

Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) is now widely acknowledged as one of the main founders of analytic philosophy. He was born in Wismar, on the Mecklenburg coast in north-east Germany, studied at the Universities of Jena and Göttingen, and spent his entire academic career back at the University of Jena teaching mathematics. His central concern was with the nature of mathematics and, in particular, of arithmetic. What are numbers, and how do we gain knowledge of arithmetic? Attempting to answer these questions made Frege as much a philosopher as a mathematician. His answer is easy to state, though much more difficult to justify (as Frege was to find to his cost), and only a little less difficult to explain—though I will do my best in this chapter. Arithmetic, according to Frege, is essentially a form of logic—a view that has come to be called ‘logicism’—and numbers are a kind of logical object. To show this, Frege had to develop logical theory, and this made him a logician as well as a mathematician and philosopher. Indeed, the basis of his status as one of the founders of analytic philosophy is as the creator of modern logic—of what we now know as *quantificational logic*. He called his logical system ‘Begriffsschrift’ (literally, ‘concept-script’), which he first presented in a short book published under that name in 1879.

Frege’s most accessible book, now generally regarded as a philosophical masterpiece, is *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, published in 1884. Central to his account is his claim that number statements are assertions about concepts. We are already in a position to understand this claim. Take our earlier example of a book—let us say, the book you are now reading. How many things do we have here? One book or 150 pages or 38,000 words (approximately)? Clearly the answer depends on the kind of thing we have in mind or, as we might now put it, the *concept* by means of which we are thinking of it. If we are conceiving of it as a book, then the answer is one; if as a set of pages, then the answer is 150; and if as a collection of words, then the answer is 38,000.

Consider a number statement—for example, that this book has 150 pages. According to Frege, we are attributing the number 150 not to the object itself (this book) but to the concept “page of this book”. (In what follows, concepts will be referred to by using double inverted commas.) This concept has 150 instances. The statement, in other words, is not about the object that it appears to be about (reflected in the fact that ‘this book’ is the grammatical subject of the sentence we use to make the statement), but about the concept that we have to grasp in order to do the relevant counting. On Frege's view, what 'The book has 150 pages' really means is 'The concept "page of this book" has 150 instances'. We will return to the idea of what a sentence 'really means' in Chapter 3. The key point here is the illustration of Frege's central claim that number statements are assertions about concepts.

If Frege is right, then we have already made progress in answering one of the apparently simplest but actually trickiest questions in the history of philosophy. What are numbers? Let us restrict ourselves here to the numbers that we use for counting, the so-called natural numbers: 0, 1, 2, 3, and so on. We can only count something when we have a concept by means of which to think of it. Something can be one book, or 150 pages, or 38,000 words; it is only when we understand the relevant concept that we can determine the number. Once stated, this might seem obvious, but it is an important insight and suggests a conclusion that might be put as follows. It is not things in themselves to which numbers are assigned but the concepts by means of which we think of things. For present purposes, we can regard concepts as representing properties of things: something can be a book or a page or a word, for example. Numbers can then be regarded as properties of properties. (As we will see, this is only a first approximation to Frege's view, but it is on the right lines.) The property of being this book has itself the property of having one instance; the property of being a page of this book has itself the property of having 150 instances; and so on.

Why was this important for Frege? The short answer is that the property of having an instance is a logical property, in other words, can be defined purely logically. We will come back to this in Chapter 2; but if we accept it, then we have already taken a step towards showing that number statements can be defined in logical terms.

Objects and concepts

Let us return to our main theme. To answer the question ‘How many things are there?’, we need to know what kinds of things are meant. In Frege’s terminology, we need to understand the relevant concept to determine what number is applicable. In talking of *kinds of things* we are already presupposing a distinction between things and kinds of things. In Frege’s terminology, this is the distinction between *objects* and *concepts*. Just as things can be classified into different kinds of things, and one thing can be classified in more than one way (something can be a horse as well as an animal), so too objects can be conceived by means of different concepts, and one and the same object can fall under different concepts.

The relation of an object’s falling under a concept is regarded by Frege as the most fundamental logical relation of all. It forms the core of the simplest kind of thought we can have. Consider, for example, the thought that Gottlob is human. This involves thinking of something, namely Gottlob, as having a certain property, namely, the property of being human. Frege characterizes this as thinking that a particular object (Gottlob) falls under a particular concept (the concept “human”). For Frege, this relation cannot be analysed further and is the basis for more complex thoughts, such as the thought that all humans are mortal, which he characterizes as the thought that whatever object falls under the concept “human” also falls under the concept “mortal”.

We can also have thoughts about concepts, such as the thought that the concept “page of this book” has 150 instances. Frege characterizes this as the thought that the concept “page of this book” falls within the concept “has 150 instances”, where the concept “page of this book” is a *first-level concept* and the concept “has 150 instances” is a *second-level concept*. First-level concepts are concepts under which objects fall, and second-level concepts are concepts within which first-level concepts fall. (Frege distinguishes here between *falling under* and *falling within*, to bring out the difference of levels involved, but the two relations are analogous.) Number statements are thus to be analysed, on Frege's view, as stating of a first-level concept that it falls within a second-level concept, a second-level concept that ascribes a certain number of instances to the first-level concept. To say that this book has 150 pages is thus to say that the first-level concept "page of this book" falls within the second-level concept "has 150 instances".

We can also say things about second-level concepts, which requires third-level concepts, and so on. The concept "second-level concept" is an example of a third-level concept (since second-level concepts fall within it). On Frege's view, then, there is a hierarchy of concepts: first-level concepts, second-level concepts, third-level concepts, and so on. The question of how many things there are—even the most basic 'kinds of things'—is already beginning to look rather more complex than we might at first have assumed!

Extensions of concepts

The distinction between objects and concepts is the most fundamental distinction in Frege's philosophy (and similar distinctions have been drawn throughout the history of philosophy). But there is one more kind of thing that we need to introduce before we can return to the question of how many things there are. This is what Frege calls an 'extension of a concept', or, as it is also called, a 'class' or 'set'. Here the governing principle is that for every concept there is a class of things that fall under it. Take the concept "human", for example. Under this concept fall Gottlob Frege, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Susan Stebbing, and so on. These objects are members of the *class* of humans; in Frege's terminology, they belong to the extension of the concept "human". This class, according to Frege, is itself a kind of object, not a 'concrete' object but an 'abstract' object. 'Concrete' objects are the objects that exist in our empirical, spatio-temporal world; ‘abstract’ objects are the objects of our rational thought, whose ‘existence’ is another of those tricky questions that have plagued philosophers at least since Plato. More specifically, Frege regards classes as *logical* objects, since the idea of a class has traditionally been seen as logical, logic being understood as what governs our rational thought.

Let us go along with Frege for the time being and treat classes (extensions of concepts) as abstract, logical objects. (We will explore this idea further in Chapter 2.) Traditionally, numbers have also been seen as a type of abstract object. Frege certainly regarded them as objects rather than concepts. We talk of ‘the number one’, for example, indicating that it refers to an object, and when we say ‘2 is a square root of 4’, this could be analysed as saying that the object 2 falls under the concept “square root of 4”. So can numbers be regarded as *logical* objects? To answer ‘yes’, the obvious suggestion is to find appropriate classes with which to identify them, and this is what Frege did.

What are the natural numbers?

If we are going to define the natural numbers (0, 1, 2, 3, and so on) as classes, understood as logical objects, then we need to find appropriate logical concepts. Two of the most fundamental concepts of logic are the concepts of identity and of negation. Take the concept of identity, or more precisely, the concept of being identical with itself. Every object is identical with itself, in other words, every object falls under the concept “identical with itself”. (It might be a strange thing to say, but seems to be trivially true.) So the corresponding class has as its members all objects. Now let us add the concept of negation to form the concept “not identical with itself”. Nothing is not identical with itself. (If every object is identical with itself, then no object