A review of Gillian Russell's
Truth in Virtue of Meaning

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When we look at the phrase "true in virtue of meaning" in early analytic philosophy, we see that it was sometimes used to express a *metaphysical* notion and at others an *epistemological* one, even though these notions were not always clearly distinguished from one another.

According to the metaphysical notion, a sentence is true in virtue of its meaning when it owes its truth value solely to its meaning and not in any way to the facts. According to the epistemological notion, a sentence is true in virtue of its meaning when its truth can be *known* merely on the basis of *grasp* of its meaning (understanding) and without the benefit of any further empirical investigation.

The epistemic notion seems both intuitive and, arguably, defensible; the metaphysical notion, on the other hand, seems neither intuitive, but rather a theoretical posit, nor ultimately salvageable.

On the first point: there do seem to be sentences – *Copper is copper* is one example – that we seem to be justified in believing just in virtue of understanding them. It's not easy to give a systematic vindication of this appearance, especially if one is precluded from appealing to metaphysical analyticity, but some of us have tried.

On the second point: in general, a sentence's truth is partly determined by its meaning and partly by the facts. There is no pre-theoretic reason to think that there have to be degenerate cases in which the factual contribution is null. (In general, a gas's temperature is partly a function of its volume and partly a function of its pressure; there is no pre-theoretic reason to think that there have to be degenerate gases in which the contribution of the pressure is null.)

Philosophers were attracted to the notion of metaphysical analyticity not because it was intuitive that there was such a thing, but rather because it seemed to be the best explanation for epistemic analyticity: for how could we be justified in holding that a sentence is true just in virtue of understanding it, unless its truth owed exclusively to its meaning and not in any way to the facts?

Quine, though, pressed a dilemma for the notion of metaphysical analyticity that we can express in somewhat updated form as follows: What should we mean by "S is true in virtue of its meaning?" On the one hand, we could mean the counterfactual: "S would

remain true no matter how the facts were varied, so long as we keep S's meaning fixed." The trouble with this construal is that it seems to collapse the distinction between the merely necessary and the analytic. *Water is H2O*, it seems, would come out analytic on this reading.

To avoid that result, we would seem to need to mean something more explanatory by "in virtue of": S's meaning would have to be the sole *explanatory ground* of its truth. But what would be a clear instance of this? If we consider the sentence *Copper is copper,* is it not natural to say that its truth is partly explained by its meaning and partly explained by the (admittedly obvious) necessary fact that all copper is self-identical?

In her bold and interesting book, Gillian Russell challenges much of this received wisdom. She assumes that metaphysical analyticity is an intuitive notion and not just a theoretical posit needed for explaining an epistemic phenomenon, that we all have intuitions about which sentences are metaphysically analytic and which ones aren't. Furthermore, she claims that the notion of metaphysical analyticity can be rescued from the Quine-inspired dilemma for it that I just outlined, and that its intuitive extension can be faithfully captured by a systematic theory, which she seeks to present. This theory entails that metaphysical analyticity has nothing much to do with explaining the phenomenon of epistemic analyticity.

Russell's proposal for salvaging metaphysical analyticity has two components. First, she claims that the "in virtue of" relation invoked in the phrase "truth in virtue of meaning" denotes a third notion of determination in between asymmetric counterfactual dependence and explanatory ground, a relation she calls "full determination." Second, she claims that the notion of "meaning" in that phrase should be updated in light of recent developments in the philosophy of language to mean "reference determiner."

Russell seeks to illustrate the notion of full determination through the following arithmetical example. Consider the binary multiplication function on the natural numbers 'x. y = z', and take the case where the first argument is set to 0 and the second to 5. In this special case, Russell says, we can say that the first argument "fully determines" the result – 0 – even though we can also say that the second argument redundantly determines the result (33-4). And Russell's thought is that a defender of truth in virtue of meaning can say that in an analytic sentence its truth-value is fully determined by the meaning of the sentence, whereas in a synthetic sentence it's not, even while we say that the truth-value of any sentence is always conjointly determined by two factors: its meaning and the way the world is.

I don't think that Russell's example illustrates a distinctive metaphysical notion of determination. "Full determination" of the result by the first argument looks to me like asymmetric counterfactual dependence of the result on the first argument. It could also be taken to be an *epistemic* notion, as Russell's language suggests when she says that, in cases of full determination by the first argument, we are able to know the result just by looking at the first argument. But, when applied to the case of analyticity, this would

yield a notion of epistemic analyticity, and not the metaphysical notion of "truth in virtue of meaning" that Russell is after.

But whether or not Russell's arithmetical example does introduce a distinctive metaphysical notion of determination, it *resembles* the counterfactual notion in that, when it is applied to the case of analyticity, it leaves us with the problem of distinguishing the merely necessary from the analytic, because we can equally well say that in the case of a necessarily true sentence the truth-value is "fully determined" by the meaning factor alone.

Russell's main idea for rescuing metaphysical analyticity has to do not with a distinctive notion of "full determination," but rather with the claim that the collapse of the analytic into the necessary can be avoided if we update our understanding of meaning in the phrase "truth in virtue of meaning" and equate it not with the notion of the semantical content of the sentence, but rather with its "reference determiner."

According to Russell, the work of Kripke and Kaplan has shown us that the pre-theoretic notion of meaning is in fact multiply ambiguous, that we ought to distinguish between the following four notions:

- character: the thing speakers must know (perhaps tacitly) to count as understanding an expression
- content: what the word contributes to what a sentence containing it says (the proposition it expresses)
- reference determiner: a condition which an object must meet in order to be the referent of, or fall in the extension of, an expression
- referent/extension: the (set of) object(s) to which the term applies. (45-6)

Armed with these distinctions, Russell claims, we can see that the analytic collapses into the necessary only on the assumption that truth in virtue of meaning is truth in virtue of content. However, if we say that the analytic is truth in virtue of reference determiners then (a) this will be avoided and, (b) we will otherwise be able to correctly reconstruct the intuitive extension of "analytic."

How would this view prevent *Water is H2O* coming out analytic? The idea is that in a different "context of introduction" "water" would have picked out XYZ and so the sentence won't necessarily come out true.

From an intuitive point of view, there is absolutely no reason to think that analyticity has *anything* to do with truth in virtue of reference determiner, especially when that is taken to include facts about the "context of introduction" of a term. A sentence is supposed to be analytic in virtue of its meaning; but there is no clear sense in which a sentence has a reference determiner. If there were anything to recommend Russell's view, it would be that, quite unexpectedly, when one plugs in "reference determiner" for "meaning," the extension of those sentences that are "true in virtue of meaning" comes out in a way that looks right.

The trouble is that there is no way to test this theory because there is no settled view about reference determination, not even in the relatively simple and much-discussed case of proper names. Russell introduces the notion of a reference determiner in connection with the well-known *Feynman* passage from *Naming and Necessity* and asks:

> So what, on this picture, is the reference determiner for my word *Feynman?*…One natural answer is that it is the chain linking the use of the expression to the referent, but I am uncomfortable with the idea that the reference determiner for an expression might be different for different speakers. I think the following is a plausible alternative: it is the condition specified by the baptiser (using a description, or by pointing) and used to pick out a referent for the name when it was introduced.…I get to use the word with that reference determiner – even though I don't know what it is – so long as, when I first learn the word, I form the intention to use it with the same meaning (whatever that is) that my interlocutor uses it with. (47-48)

As Russell notes, many philosophers have thought that what Kripke's discussion shows is that the condition that determines the reference of a name is the chain linking the uses of the name back to an object picked out in an initial dubbing. Gareth Evans thought that this view couldn't be right because it gives the wrong account of a name, like *Madagascar*, whose referent has changed over time. He thought that the correct account would have it that the referent is the object that is the dominant causal source of one's current beliefs involving the name.

Both Kripke's original view and Evans's alternative have the consequence that a name's reference determiner can vary from one person to the next. Russell says that she rejects such views because she is "uncomfortable" with that consequence. She says that she would rather equate the reference determiner for *Feynman* with the condition that it be the object that satisfies the description used in the initial dubbing.

But there's nothing in the idea of a reference determiner as such that makes it implausible that the reference determiner for an expression might be different for different speakers. So far as I can see, the only reason that Russell has for not liking this consequence is that it would commit her to saying (implausibly) that what's analytic varies from person to person. But to treat this as a good reason for rejecting an otherwise plausible view about reference determination is to allow one to tailor the evidence to fit one's theory, rather than the other way round. And no one, so far as I know, takes seriously Russell's view that the referent of some name in my repertoire should be thought of as determined by the condition that it be the object that satisfies some initial dubbing. There may not have been an initial dubbing. And even if there had been, there would still be Evans's case of 'Madagascar.'

Things get murkier still when we come to expressions other than names. Russell acknowledges that there is no settled view about the conditions that determine reference for a range of terms. She says:

> Since my aim is to clarify the notion of truth in virtue of meaning, I intend to tackle this problem by force. I will assume a theory (often a version of my current favorite theory) of reference determination for the different kinds of expression and show which sentences would turn out to be true in virtue of meaning on those assumptions….[Moreover] even if we have settled on, say, a Millian conception of names, I do not really know how the referent of, say, *Hesperus* was determined, since it is not required of me as a competent speaker. So where I don't know the real story, I'm just going to make one up. …. (57-8)

I was surprised to find that Russell thought she could proceed in this way. Once we have decided to read "in virtue of" to mean, roughly, counterfactual dependence, or "full determination," the only remaining problem is to come up with an account of meaning that doesn't yield bizarre results about what's analytic. But how can Russell claim to have shown that if we mean "reference determiner" by "meaning" we will get a correct reconstruction of our pre-theoretic intuitions about analyticity, if we simply make up the facts about reference determiners as we go along, without much regard either to their truth or their plausibility?

Even if we set these objections aside, it turns out we are still faced with a version of the problem that talk of reference determiners was supposed to solve, namely, that of certain non-analytic necessary sentences being ruled analytic by the theory. As Russell points out, someone might well hold that the sentence *There is a god* is such that, while it contains no expressions whose reference determiners are sensitive to context of introduction or utterance, it expresses a necessary truth. Then it looks as though it will count as having its truth fully determined by the reference determiners of its constituent expressions even though it doesn't look analytic. (I think everyone would agree that no existence statement should be true purely in virtue of meaning.)

This leads Russell to complicate her account by introducing "containment" and "exclusion" relations among reference determiners. She writes as though these are intuitive notions about which it would be natural to hold that they obey certain principles (93-4). But there is really nothing intuitive about them. And the principles that she invokes are just stipulated necessary conditions that serve to partly constrain which relations she has in mind, but fall short of characterizing them adequately. This casts doubt on her subsequent claim that facts about containment and exclusion can serve to *explain* how the truth of a given sentence is determined.

Russell's attempt to resurrect a notion that many have given up for dead is bold, tenacious and original. In the end, I don't think it succeeds in what it sets out to do. I also see very little interest in a notion of the analytic that doesn't connect with the phenomenon of knowledge in virtue of understanding (epistemic analyticity). But I do not doubt that future discussions of the topic will benefit from engaging with the provocative ideas that she has set before us.