

Analytic Philosophy and Intrinsic Historicism

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I. GLOCK'S TWOFOLD CRITERION

In his extremely well informed and thought-provoking search for the identity of analytic philosophy, Hanjo Glock comes to the conclusion that neither a purely historical nor a purely theoretical criterion will accurately determine the extension of the notion. Hence, he suggests that we conjoin both criteria: a philosopher counts as analytic if his or her philosophy is *both* genetically connected with the tradition stemming from Frege, Russell and the early Wittgenstein *and* theoretically similar to other philosophies in that tradition. Theoretical similarity is not to be conceived as sharing a fixed set of theoretical features that are regarded as common to all instances of analytic philosophy, but rather in terms of family resemblance, i.e. as the sharing of *some* features in a list. Glock's list includes identification with the linguistic turn, rejection of speculative metaphysics, reductive analysis, a distinction between science and philosophy, respect for formal logic and (natural) science, the belief that philosophy is argumentative in nature, and the pursuit of clarity [p. 218]. A philosopher counts as analytic if (and only if), besides being genetically related to the analytic tradition, his philosophy shares some (perhaps one should say "a few") such features.

Glock believes that his account is extensionally accurate: his twofold criterion picks out all and only the philosophers that are commonly regarded as analytic. I essentially agree with him. There may be borderline cases: for example, Stanley Cavell is genetically connected to the analytic tradition, is no friend of speculative metaphysics, and believes in the distinction of science and philosophy and the pursuit of clarity; nevertheless, some would hesitate to classify him as an analytic philosopher. Other controversial cases could be mentioned: Charles Morris and Clarence I. Lewis from mid-20th century philosophy, and, from today's scene, Axel Honneth and many people working in the phenomenological tradition in France, Italy and Germany. Still, every classification admits of borderline cases: Glock's criterion seems to me as good as we can get in the way of determining a plausible extension for "analytic philosopher".

However, a defining criterion may be extensionally accurate without being *vivid*. A criterion is vivid if it immediately gives one some idea of what a member of the extension looks like: of its physiognomy, so to speak. Thus, we may define the number 2 as the successor of 1, or as the only number n greater than 1 such that the equation $x^n + y^n = z^n$ is satisfied by positive integers. Though both definitions are extensionally accurate, the former is more vivid than the latter. Or, we may characterize the Okapi as the only evolutionary relative of the giraffe that is alive today; alternatively, we may characterize it as a four-legged mammal about the size of a large antelope, with a rather long neck and zebra-like striped legs. Here, the latter characterization is more vivid. Concerning Glock's criterion, I am not sure that it is sufficiently vivid. Could one draw from it a picture of what it is to be an analytic philosopher today? Is the criterion physiognomic?

Glock himself remarks that perhaps the tradition of analytic philosophy "is currently losing its distinct identity" [p. 231]. I take this to mean that the historical tree of analytic philosophy has come to have many branches, some of which are theoretically so far apart that saying that a thinker is genetically connected to the tradition amounts to saying very little about what kind of thinker she is. The genetic criterion is not vivid. This is not the reason why Glock himself regards the historical criterion as insufficient: his reason is that there appear to be intuitively non-analytic philosophers, such as Gadamer and Habermas, who did interact with the analytic tradition [p. 223]. However, if this were the whole problem, it would not be reason enough to declare the historical criterion insufficient, for such interactions were both occasional and relatively unimportant. I feel that the real reason for regarding the historical criterion as insufficient has more to do with the theoretical diversity of the analytic tradition than with such minor counterexamples. It is lack of vividness of the historical criterion that makes us (and Glock) look for a theoretical supplement. But precisely the reason that makes the historical criterion non-vivid – namely, the doctrinal and methodological diversity of the analytic tradition – makes it hard to find an adequate theoretical supplement.

Glock does a good job of singling out theoretical and/or methodological features that may be regarded as contributing to define analytic philosophy as a family resemblance notion. It would be hard to find an analytic philosopher who despised both formal logic and natural science, had no use for arguments, made fun of clarity, were fond of speculative metaphysics, etc.; and conversely, non-analytic philosophers seldom share more than so many features in Glock's list. However, do such features provide us with a vivid characterization of analytic philosophy? Shall we explain to the layperson what kind of philosopher an analytic philosopher is by telling her that he was influenced by Frege or Russell or Quine or..., and, in addition, he took the linguistic turn *or* believes in some distinction between science and philosophy *or* repudiates speculative metaphysics *or* thinks that formal logic is important

for philosophy *or...* [take a sizable subset of the above]? Well, perhaps; but it would require some time and quite a few examples.

II. A MORE VIVID CRITERION

I wonder whether we could achieve a more vivid characterization by relying on less explicitly doctrinal features. For example, let us think of the grounds on which a paper is *rejected* by a standard analytical journal of philosophy, as distinct from history of philosophy (disregarding the most obvious motives, such as bad prose or sheer silliness). A paper may be rejected because

- (a) it is not theoretically engaged but merely interpretative: it does not put forth any substantial claim but just presents and comments upon some philosophical doctrine;
- (b) it is not original: it reiterates views that are part of the established lore on the subject;
- (c) it is not well argued: its claims are poorly argued or not argued at all;
- (d) it is not state-of-the-art: it ignores the recent literature on the subject, or it mentions it but does not discuss it;
- (e) it lacks rigor: e.g. it introduces terms of art whose meaning is neither obvious nor explicitly defined, it is poorly organized, its point is not clear.

The list may not be complete. Notice, however, that it does not include (and, I believe, should not include)

- (f) topic,
- (g) doctrinal reasons, i.e. putting forth one particular claim rather than another,
- (h) triviality, i.e. making minor points on minor issues.

(f) is controversial: nowadays, many journals choose to promote topics that are regarded as “hot” or constitutive of the journal’s identity, so that they might reject an otherwise acceptable article for being irrelevant to their preferred issues. Other journals, however, are more ecumenical.

I believe that none of (a)-(e) – with the *possible* exception of (d) – would be a *sine qua non* for either a continental or a “traditionalist” journal. Thus, we can draw from the above list something like a characterization of today’s analytic standard, as opposed to alternative standards (or lack thereof) of both continental and traditionalist philosophy. A contribution to analytic philosophy should be

- (1) theoretical as opposed to hermeneutical: it should put forth substantial philosophical claims that are intended to be original;
- (2) argumentative as opposed to dogmatic: it should argue for its claims in accordance with established argumentative patterns;
- (3) part of an ongoing discussion, as opposed to expressing a thinker’s solitary ruminations;
- (4) rigorous as opposed to rhapsodic, imprecise, or obscure.

A paper having such features would fit the contemporary analytic standard, whether or not it endorses the linguistic turn or rejects speculative metaphysics or practices conceptual analysis or presupposes a distinction between science and philosophy. By contrast, an article that lacked all or most of (1)-(4) would not qualify as analytic even if it shared every doctrinal commitment I just listed.¹ (Hence, the later Wittgenstein’s philosophical writings would not fit today’s analytic standard, which is as it should be. Very great philosophers often set standards, they seldom comply with them).

This picture of the analytic standard is very close to Ansgar Beckermann’s characterization of analytic philosophy as presented by Glock. According to Beckermann, today’s analytic philosophy is characterized by the acceptance of two views: “First, that philosophy seeks to answer substantive (rather than historical) questions [item 1 in my list], in a way that is both systematic and governed by universally applicable standards of rationality [2]; secondly, that this ambition can only be achieved if the concepts and arguments philosophers employ are made as clear and transparent as possible [4]” [Glock p. 206]. Beckermann fails to mention the communitarian requirement [3] (which, in my view, is importantly characteristic of analytic philosophy), but, aside from that, there is much agreement between his view and mine. Glock, on the other hand, appears to reject Beckermann’s definition as entailing an honorific conception of analytic philosophy: an analytic philosopher would turn out to be a good philosopher by *fiat*. But we sadly know this not to be the case.

Is this really so? It does not seem to me that it is, for two distinct reasons. First of all, the standard defines what analytic philosophers are sup-

posed to achieve in the way of writing philosophy, and, perhaps, what they try to achieve: surely not what they do achieve. A philosopher might try to fit the standard and not succeed, thus coming out as a poor analytic philosopher. It's the trying, not the achieving that makes her an analytic philosopher. Secondly, that fitting the analytic standard is the hallmark of *good* philosophy is by no means universally acknowledged. Many continental thinkers would rather see it as the hallmark of trivial philosophy, or of boring philosophy, or of uncritical and inhuman philosophy: the kind of philosophy a machine would produce.² Moreover, many traditionalist philosophers would regard the standard as characterizing misguided philosophy, that believes it can afford to disregard the history of philosophy and employ philosophical concepts as if they had been created yesterday (more on this later). Hence, it is quite controversial that Beckermann's characterization, or my own, defines good philosophy and not just analytic philosophy.

My characterization is not intended to be incompatible with Glock's. As far as Glock's theoretical criterion is concerned, it partly overlaps with it (items [2] and [4]). It does not mention any substantive doctrine, such as the linguistic turn or reductive analysis, as I believe that no allegiance to such doctrines is really necessary for qualifying as an analytic philosopher today. However, I would grant Glock that all or most analytic philosophers do in fact subscribe to at least some among such doctrines. As far as the historical criterion is concerned, again, though it is conceivable that a philosopher might conform to the standard while being utterly unaware of every analytic philosopher from Frege to Kripke, I can't think of no one that fits the description. Thus, my characterization may well be extensionally equivalent to, though perhaps more vivid than Glock's.

III. ANALYTIC VS. TRADITIONALIST

Though my characterization of the analytic standard does not explicitly involve any philosophical doctrine, it clearly presupposes a few substantive assumptions. It presupposes that there are philosophical theses ([1]), against the later Wittgenstein and some of his followers; that philosophical theses can be formulated, entertained and defended in disregard of genetic issues concerning the origin and history of the notions they involve ([1]), against much "traditionalist" philosophy; that philosophical claims ought to be argued, and that there is broad consensus on what counts as an acceptable argument ([2]), against much continental philosophy; that philosophy is not irreducibly subjective, the expression of a personal worldview ([3]), against many both in "traditionalist" and in continental philosophy; and more. Though we analytic philosophers are sometimes tempted to equate analytic philosophy with philosophy *tout court*, we should resist the temptation and con-

cede that our work is predicated on substantive assumptions that can be, and have been challenged (this is more easily done if, like the present writer, one spends most of one's time in a continental-*cum*-traditionalist environment).

It is to Hanjo Glock's great credit that he insists that most philosophy done on the European continent is neither analytic nor continental but, as he puts it, "traditionalist": it is traditionalist, not continental philosophy "that actually dominates academic philosophy on the continent of Europe" [p. 17; see pp. 80ff.]. This is true of other parts of the world as well: traditionalist philosophy is widespread and occasionally hegemonic in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. "Most non-analytic philosophers of the twentieth century do not belong to continental philosophy" [p. 86].

Glock describes traditionalist philosophers as pursuing "the scholarly study of traditional philosophy" [p. 86], which is, of course, correct. However, many of them are not historians of philosophy in the strict, subdisciplinary sense: they do not search archives, they mostly work on published texts (not on manuscripts), they lay no claim to historical discoveries such as finding a heretofore unknown version of a philosophical work or establishing the presence of X at place Y in the year 16ZZ. What they mostly do is *interpreting* the great (or, sometimes, not so great) philosophers, i.e. presenting their thoughts in a new or partially new light, with an eye (and, frequently, both eyes) to the inherent philosophical value of such thoughts. These are often regarded not simply as historical objects worth knowing for the sake of historical awareness but as theoretically significant, either as part of *philosophia perennis* or as particularly telling for the present time. These scholars do philosophy – philosophy, not history of philosophy – by proxy: they have the classics speak for them, though in a voice that is modulated by their own interpretation.

It would be interesting and, I believe, philosophically significant to understand traditionalist philosophy better than we do, both in its historical roots (probably in German Idealism, Neo-Kantianism and Historicism) and in its present theoretical motivations. Here, I will hint at just one aspect of this complex philosophical phenomenon. Many traditionalist philosophers have no use for continental philosophy, which they regard as obscure, confused, fantastic, and based on ignorance of the history of philosophy. However, they are not necessarily sympathetic to analytic philosophy either; on the contrary, they are often strongly critical of it. From many years of conversations with the traditionalists, I gather that most such criticisms are of two kinds: (a) analytic philosophy is *trivial*: it fails to address the "big" issues but concentrates on minor questions that are often the artefact of the analytic tradition itself (for analytic philosophy is *scholastic*). This is why it does not speak to a general audience or to other disciplines, but only to analytic philosophers [see Glock, pp. 247-8]; (b) analytic philosophy is *shallow*: it systematically replaces "thick" concepts, whose very nature coincides with their history, with

“thin” surrogates that are caricatures of the real things, and whose vicissitudes are irrelevant for genuine philosophy. Even worse, it then proceeds to describe the great philosophers’ views as if they had been concerned with the analytic caricatures of concepts and theories, thereby misunderstanding such views and making them irrelevant to philosophy proper (the latter is the charge of “anachronism”, Glock pp. 103-09).

The first charge – triviality – is partly fading into obsolescence, as analytic philosophers have been addressing all sorts of “big” moral and political issues in the last few decades. It survives as traditionalist intolerance for analytic technicalities: intricate arguments, the occasional logical formula, references to exoteric doctrines of unknown (to the traditionalist) authors, etc. It also survives as protest against analytic disregard for the question that many non-analytic philosophers see as paramount, namely “Where are we, as human beings, located from a world-historical standpoint? What kind of beings have we come to be?” (“Philosophy is its own time comprehended in thought”, Hegel); which, however, is probably voiced by continental philosophers (in the narrow sense) more often than by traditionalists. Still, it is strictly connected with what I take to be the root of the traditionalists’ other charge – shallowness.

The root is what Glock calls ‘intrinsic historicism’ [p. 90]: the view on which philosophy is inherently historical. Glock spends quite a few pages (with which I fully agree) rejecting the charge of anachronism, but doesn’t seem to have much to say on intrinsic historicism as such. This is unfortunate, for – it seems to me – intrinsic historicism is the prevalent ideology of the traditionalists. It is thanks to intrinsic historicism that a traditionalist can see herself as doing philosophy proper – not history of philosophy – while studying Parmenides or Malebranche, Aquinas or Schleiermacher. The core idea appears to be that philosophy deals with concepts and theories whose nature is historical, and can only be grasped by analyzing their historical vicissitudes. If it were objected that everyone is free to introduce his own concepts (for a concept is just a word together with its rules of use) the traditionalist would reply that we are certainly free to do so, but then we would be changing the subject: we would no longer be employing or analyzing the *philosophical concepts* of, say, substance, cause, mind, consciousness, and so forth; we would be employing and analyzing certain artificial surrogates of them. For the traditionalist, it is as if the nature of philosophical concepts were forever entrusted to a corpus of texts, the canon of philosophy. Though conceptual and theoretical innovations with respect to the canon are not in principle ruled out, they must stem from reflection on their canonical predecessors. Hence the fatal weakness of analytic philosophy, which just doesn’t mind the canon, or when it does, it works with a childishly simplified picture of canonical concepts and theories. If it is remarked that much philosophical reflection is engendered by new phenomena (scientific, technological, social,

political) that just were not there for Plato, Descartes or Kant to comment upon, a frequent answer is that such novelties are, to a large extent, illusory: in their essential aspects, which are all that matters for philosophy, such phenomena are not really new and were duly scrutinized by the canonical authors.

Though each and every claim of intrinsic historicism is debatable, here I do not have enough room for a serious discussion. Let me just remark that it doesn't seem that the venerated canonical authors themselves complied with the prescriptions of intrinsic historicism, in their ground-breaking philosophical work.

IV. COMMUNICATING ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

It is seldom objected to traditionalists that, at this point, analytic philosophy may well have created its own canon. It is understandable that it conceives of itself as, to some extent, self-sufficient, like other philosophical traditions have been, from late Medieval Christian philosophy (so-called Scholasticism) to Cartesianism to post-Kantian idealism. All such traditions were theoretically diverse, yet they all possessed a shared vocabulary and a canon of authors and texts; each of them, though largely self-contained, acknowledged connections with previous philosophy, some real, some more or less imaginary. So, analytic philosophy is no big news in this respect.

That a philosophical tradition may become relatively insulated from general culture and the educated public, due to technicality and the prevalence of intra-paradigmatic issues, is no big news either: it is a natural development for any philosophical movement that has captured the consensus of a wide community. The seminal writings that start a philosophical tradition often get a wide audience, for they address big issues and tend to disregard many details and complications; details and complications, on the other hand, are exactly what further work in the tradition is about. Analytic philosophy is more than a century old: small wonder that it be deep into technicalities. Such technicalities are obviously inaccessible to the general public, and – with few exceptions – of no immediately perceivable interest to the practitioners of other disciplines, be they in the sciences or in the humanities (similarly, the details of string theory or the niceties of Shakespearean philology are both inaccessible and of no immediately perceivable interest to most philosophers, or to everybody else except experts).

Hence, analytic philosophy has a communication problem, like other philosophical traditions had in the past, and like many highly developed disciplines have nowadays. But in the case of analytic philosophy this is seen by many, including Glock, as an anomaly that ought to be eliminated, or at least mitigated. If analytic philosophers have something to say, they should strive to communicate it “to all concerned, whether they be other philosophers, sci-

entists, scholars, professionals, politicians, artists or laypeople” [p. 248]. Compare: if algebraic topologists have something to say, they should strive to communicate it “to all concerned”. One difference between the two cases is, of course, that algebraic topology has sources of social legitimization (in other disciplines and, ultimately, in technology) that philosophy, unfortunately, does not share. So that some have conjectured that a discipline that is both exoteric and not obviously relevant to any socially shared purpose may eventually lose all social support and just disappear from the cultural scene [Kuklick (2004), p. 285].

One doesn’t know what to make of such predictions: after all, literary criticism has been with us for centuries. But anyway, can analytic philosophy be communicated to wider audiences? Not as it stands, I take it; i.e. not as it is published in *Mind* and by Oxford University Press. Should it change its ways for the sake of better communication? Well, *some* change would be welcome: for example, I see no reason why analytic philosophy should be so poorly written. In this case, it seems, imitation of the hard sciences has produced some perverse effects. However, I don’t think that better prose would suffice to solve the communication problem; neither do I think that analytic philosophy should give up its present level of technicality and argumentative rigor, which is both intrinsic to its present stage and incompatible with communication to wide audiences.

Perhaps analytic philosophy can be popularized. Not all of it, for much of analytic philosophy consists in discussion of intraparadigmatic issues that would hardly fascinate the general public even if simplified and well told. Few are going to be transfixed by asymmetrical dependence or the disjunctive theory of perception. Still, there are examples of successful vulgarization of analytic contents, such as Thomas Nagel’s *What Does it All Mean?* (1987) and Michael Lynch’s *True to Life* (2004). Much more could be done, for there *are* analytic themes that have wide-ranging implications, some of which are of general and immediate concern; and not just in moral and political philosophy. I’ll mention two examples: Wittgenstein’s criticism of privacy, and the widely accepted distinction between truth and justification. I recently published a short book in Italian (*Per la verità*, (2007)) that was, in part, a vulgarization of well known philosophical results on the latter theme. The book was read and discussed by sociologists, people in law (both academics and professionals), and a few scientists, who – it appears – found the issue relevant to their own concerns.

Working and publishing for a general audience may be professionally costly, particularly in communities that regard such activities as irrelevant (or worse) to a philosopher’s standing. On the other hand, it may be philosophically rewarding. Wilfrid Sellars famously said that the aim of philosophy “is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term” [Sellars (1963), p.1]. I would

be happy to concede that that is just *one* aim of philosophy; however, it is one that we analytic philosophers seem to have forgotten about. Perhaps, reflecting on wider implications of our technical issues might help to recover it.

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Notes

¹ It will be objected that there are analytic philosophers who do hermeneutical work (say, on the classics of the analytic tradition) while not being historians of philosophy in the narrow, subdisciplinary sense. Granted: any tradition needs expositors and interpreters. If they are analytic, however, they will fit (2)-(4).

² See Horkheimer, Adorno (1944), p. 31.

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RESUMEN

En mi comentario sobre el libro de Glock *What is Analytic Philosophy?* ofrezco (1) una caracterización de la filosofía analítica que considero más vivaz que la que presenta Glock, si bien no es inconsistente con ella, (2) discuto la oposición entre filosofía analítica y filosofía "tradicionalista" y la ideología del "historicismo intrínseco" y (3) hago unos breves comentarios sobre el problema de la comunicación de la filosofía analítica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *filosofía analítica, filosofía tradicionalista, historicismo.*

ABSTRACT

In my comment to H. J. Glock's *What is Analytic Philosophy?* (1) I offer a characterization of analytic philosophy that I take to be more vivid than Glock's though not inconsistent with it, (2) I discuss the opposition of analytic and "traditionalist" philosophy and the ideology of "intrinsic historicism", (3) I briefly comment on the issue of communicating analytic philosophy.

KEYWORDS: *Analytic Philosophy, Traditionalist Philosophy, Historicism.*