

Analytic Philosophy – the Heritage

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I

I am delighted to have been asked to contribute to the debate arising out of Hanjo Glock's erudite and thought-provoking book *What is Analytic Philosophy?* In it he surveys the history of the analytic tradition, the meta-philosophical views of the participants in the analytic movement, and the widely differing accounts various authors have given of the history of analytic philosophy. The panorama is sparkling, and the experienced guide's observations pick out features of the landscape with nice discrimination and entertaining wit.

I shall not take issue with Hanjo over whether Frege – the indisputable father of modern formal logic – is also the great uncle, grandfather or father of the analytic tradition in twentieth-century philosophy. Philosophical genealogy is more a matter of *post bellum* escutcheons than a matter of genes, and there is no College of Philosophical Heralds to which to appeal. Nor shall I enter the lists to defend the view I registered in *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy* that Quine's apostasy (as he called his repudiation of the salient doctrines of logical positivism [Quine (1986), p. 16]) and his subsequent influence in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s spelled the beginning of the end of analytic philosophy. Whether that is so or not will become clear in fifty years time, when it will be evident, as it is not yet, whether analytic philosophy is now no more than the dying embers of a once flourishing tradition, or is merely taking a pause before bursting again into illuminating flame. Rather I shall raise a few questions about the direction that what remains of the analytic tradition is taking, whether that is consistent with the analytic heritage, and what elements of the analytic heritage are worth preserving.

II

A number of trends are distinguishable in contemporary philosophy that regards itself as heir to the analytic tradition. One is the revival of metaphysics. A second is the growth of philosophical naturalism. A third, characteristic of the American turn towards naturalism, but by no means unique to it, is the repudiation of a fundamental difference between philosophical investigation and natural science. A fourth is the increased specialization characteristic of much contemporary philosophical writing, which has led to a form of scholasticism. A fifth is the greatly increased interest in philosophy's past and the proliferation of scholarly historical studies of individual figures and general movements of thought, as well as overviews of periods in the history of ideas.

III

The anti-metaphysical turn in analytic philosophy in the twentieth century got under way with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and the Vienna Circle's polemical writings. The *Tractatus* condemned metaphysics, understood as the attempt to describe on purely a priori grounds the necessary features of the world, as nonsense. The purported sentences of metaphysics, Wittgenstein argued, were ill-formed, treating formal concept-words (like 'object', 'number', 'colour', 'proposition'), which are actually expressions for unbound variables, as if they were material concept-words. Nevertheless, the *Tractatus* advanced the idiosyncratic view that the world *is* informed by metaphysical necessities, but that they cannot be described by 'philosophical', or 'metaphysical' sentences. Rather they are *shown* by ordinary (non-philosophical) sentences. The Vienna Circle embraced the *Tractatus*'s condemnation of 'metaphysical' sentences as strictly nonsensical, but rejected any suggestion of an ineffable metaphysics that is shown by well-formed sentences with a sense. A similar anti-metaphysical turn was evident among the Cambridge analytic philosophers of the inter-war years. Braithwaite, for example, wrote that 'we can be certain beforehand that a system professing to derive by logically necessary implications from logically necessary premises interesting empirical propositions is wrong somewhere. We in Cambridge have been fortunate in having *The Nature of Existence* of J. E. McTaggart as an awful example' [Braithwaite (1933), p. 23]. This anti-metaphysical tendency was evident among Oxford philosophers too. As Ryle observed, 'Most of us took fairly untragically [the Vienna Circle's] demolition of Metaphysics. After all, we never met anyone engaged in committing any metaphysics; our copies of *Appearance and Reality* were dusty; and most of us had never seen a copy of

Sein und Zeit [Ryle (1970), p. 10]. This attitude persisted in the post-war era too, when Oxford was the philosophical centre of the western world.

A change came in 1959 when Strawson published *Individuals*, with the subtitle *an Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*. Insofar as metaphysics is the investigation of the themes that Aristotle discussed in his eponymous collection of writings, then, of course, Strawson was engaged in metaphysics. But insofar as metaphysics was supposed to be an investigation of the objective anankastic scaffolding of all possible worlds – then, of course, he was not. His enterprise was simply an analytic investigation of the most general and fundamental *categories of expression* in our conceptual scheme. But Strawson's use of the term 'metaphysics' removed it from the *Index Prohibitorum* of analytic philosophy, and before long it corrupted the youth. Kripke fathered a form of metaphysics derived from reflections on proper names and modal logic. It purported to describe features of all possible worlds. And that legitimized the nomenclature and the endeavour. Today the majority of philosophers in the Anglophone world and their students have no qualms in speaking of the 'metaphysics of . . . ' – almost anything, from sensations and mental images to space and time. There is no doubt that the revival of so-called metaphysics has satisfied philosophers' craving for a special subject matter of their own. Physicists, it seems, discover the existence of positrons, and meta-physicists, Professor Williamson tells us [Williamson (2007), p. 19], discover the existence of universals. Chemists discover that water consists of H₂O, and metaphysicists discover that this is true in all possible worlds. Surprisingly, there has been little serious debate on what *precisely* this subject is, how it makes its a posteriori 'discoveries', what a 'necessary fact' might be and what its alleged necessity might consist in. Patter about rigid designation and truth in all possible worlds, as well as appeals to intuitions, hunches and guesses have been an excuse for not engaging seriously with these questions.

This revival of metaphysics is, I think, incompatible with mainstream analytic philosophy from its early days in the 1920's through its Cambridge and Viennese days to its apogee in post-war Oxford from 1945 until the 1970s. In this respect, contemporary philosophy has turned away from the analytic heritage. Whether this is backsliding or progress is a matter for debate.

IV

Philosophical naturalism has been characterized by a journalist as *the* distinctive development over the last thirty years, marrying the American pragmatist tradition to rigorous 'scientific method' in philosophy. For, it is claimed, there has been a *naturalistic turn* – away from the a priori methods of traditional philosophy towards a methodological unification of science and phi-

losophy. Its main roots are in the writings of Quine, who advocated the naturalization of epistemology. Epistemology naturalized was in effect the abandonment of epistemology in favour of a millennial neurophysiological learning theory that would explain in purely causal terms how the irritation of our surfaces by radiation and impact ultimately results in our theories of the world.

There is no such science, and it is doubtful whether there ever will be. What results from the input of radiation and irritations is motion and sound waves, not action and theory. Moreover, there is no such thing as a theory of the world. The rejection of foundationalism was indeed part of the transformation of one phase of analytic philosophy into another. Other participants in undermining foundationalism were Wittgenstein, Ryle and Austin. But the idea that millennial neurophysiological learning theory should displace epistemology rested on a misunderstanding of the roles of epistemology. It would not be within the power of naturalized epistemology, were there such a subject, to resolve such questions as whether knowledge entails belief, whether belief is a state of mind like feeling cheerful, whether doubt presupposes the possibility of certainty, or why one can't forget the difference between right and wrong. These are philosophical, conceptual, questions – and repudiation of the analytic heritage in the name of naturalism ensures that they will not be answered by post-analytic naturalist philosophy.

V

Meta-philosophical naturalism is a variant of the old view, which Russell advocated prior to the First World War, that philosophy is continuous with science. He held that philosophy, no less than physics, investigates the natural world, differing from science primarily in the generality of its concerns, e.g. the most general facts in the universe, and the logical forms of all facts. This conception, inimical to the analytic tradition from the *Tractatus*, through the Vienna Circle and Cambridge analysts to Oxford philosophers in the post-war quarter of a century, was revived by Quine.¹ Reversion to an older conception of the subject was indeed part of his apostasy – a consequence, as he saw it, of his repudiation of Carnap's distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions, his espousal of an extreme form of verificationist holism, and his rejection of reductionism. This view of philosophy as continuous with science, eschewing a priori methods in favour of . . . – perhaps no more than armchair speculation – now has many adherents, especially, but by no means only, in the USA. But it is the converse view that animated mainstream analytic philosophy from the 1920s until the 1970s.

It seemed to numerous analytic philosophers both before and after the war that Wittgenstein's insight into the nature of philosophy and into the

categorial differences between philosophical and natural scientific investigation gave philosophy a genuine vocation without lumbering it, as it has so often been lumbered in the past, with an illusory subject matter. The conception of philosophy as an elucidatory discipline, concerned with mapping our conceptual scheme (the logic of scientific discourse (Carnap), logical geography (Ryle), or connective analysis (Strawson)) and eradicating conceptual confusions both within and without philosophy was a major plank in the platforms of three major phases of analytic philosophy. Its current repudiation is an aspect of what certainly appears to be the slow withering away of a great tradition. If anything needs defending and preserving in the analytic heritage, it is above all the conception of philosophical investigation as the clarification of our forms of representation (or conceptual scheme) and the eradication of conceptual confusion. The natural sciences today are the greatest sources of conceptual confusion and metaphysical myth-making (I have in mind such sciences as cosmology, cognitive neuroscience, experimental psychology, theoretical linguistics, computer science and artificial intelligence). One of the great roles we have inherited from analytic philosophy is not: to sing the Hallelujah chorus to the sciences, but: to arraign the sciences before the tribunal of sense and to show, from case to case, where they go off the rails.

VI

A fourth (deplorable) feature of contemporary philosophy is the ever increasing specialization. This is patent among graduate students and is evident in the training they receive at most university philosophy departments. It is also evident among many of their teachers – who are no longer just doctors, or even ENT consultants – but just left nostril specialists! This development is partly the result of extra-philosophical developments in universities in the Western world – in particular the ‘publish or perish’ ethos that forces young scholars to rush into print at every opportunity, long before they could possibly have anything to say. It is encouraged by the emulation of science journals, in which virtually every serious paper in the last ten years must be cited and discussed if a submitted essay is to be published. This is leading young philosophers (as well as graduates and post-doctoral students) to ignore anything written more than a decade ago. This deliberate ignoring of the past is supported by the belief that philosophy, like the natural sciences, is progressive, and that there is no more reason for a philosopher to read Wittgenstein, Carnap, Ryle or Strawson (let alone Hume or Kant) than for a scientist to read Paracelsus, Newton or Einstein.

It is true that analytic philosophy, in those phases of its development in which system-building was eschewed, fostered a piecemeal approach, with a consequent preponderance of papers over books. But few if any of the great figures in the analytic tradition had anything other than broad interests and wide horizons. If philosophy is worth doing at all, it must surely culminate in a wide overview of a substantial part of our conceptual network. The prize it offers is an understanding of the way the net is woven, an ability to distinguish descriptions of the fish from descriptions of the net, and the capacity to identify holes in the net. Specialization is sometimes explained and justified by reference to progress and professionalism. But the only progress in philosophy consists in the availability of finer and more illuminating distinctions and the eradication of philosophical illusions and confusions. ‘Professionalization’ has amounted to no more than ever increasing scholasticism, as each little paper has another smaller paper on its back to bite it.

VII

The increasing number of historical monographs and historical overviews, and the admirable standards of scholarship that are typically exhibited by the authors is another of the legacies of analytic philosophy. It is striking that a pessimist about the future of analytic philosophy, Georg-Henrik von Wright predicted that perhaps all that will result from analytic philosophy in the end will be a much greater adequacy in dealing with the great philosophies of the past. I hope that he was over-pessimistic. But he was surely right that the tools developed in the analytic tradition have lent themselves to fruitful application in the studying the history of philosophy.

VIII

I shall conclude by turning to aspects of the analytic tradition that surely need to be conserved and cultivated – but which are in danger of being lost.

First and foremost is clarity of expression and argument. In its heyday, both in the Vienna Circle and among the post-war analytic philosophers, limpid prose and clarity of argument were the rule. Occasionally, as in the case of Ryle and Austin, the style of writing constituted, as Strawson later observed, a contribution to English letters. *Avoidance* of ‘isms’, ‘ists’ and ‘ians’ is conducive to clarity of thought. They are ready-mades, and like Marcel Duchamps’ ready-mades, they should be consigned to museums. And if

avoidance of ‘isms’ is conducive to clear thinking, then aversion to acronyms is conducive to clear writing. Foot and note disease, as Ryle called it, should be held at bay, and the purely decorative use of variable letters and formulae of the predicate calculus should incur a fine. So much ought to be self-evident. All this can and should be learnt from the better writers in the analytic tradition in its heyday.

Secondly, the habit of challenging questions posed, rather than rushing in to answer them is a meritorious disposition cultivated within the analytic tradition. Very often critical pressure on the question will show it to rest upon misconceived presuppositions, as in the case of ‘How can we understand sentences we have never heard before?’ or ‘What is the relationship between my mind and my body?’ or ‘How does the brain cause actions?’ We are far too prone to try to answer questionable questions rather to question them. The first question turns on a misconception of the nature of understanding (thinking it to be a process or activity).² The second turns on the misconception that *my mind* and *my body* (the body I have rather than the body I am) are, like Jack and Jill, the kinds of things that *can* be related in certain ways – rather than being akin to *my sake*, which is no relatum.³ The third turns on the questionable supposition that because neural activity in the motor cortex causes muscular contraction in a limb, it is the brain that causes my writing a letter. Deep questions call for probing questions far more than for answers.

Thirdly, and closely related to the disposition to challenge questions, is the disposition to question received dicta. Each philosophical era suffers from failure to challenge its own fundamental presuppositions. That is evident, for example, in the early modern period’s obsession with ideas as the constituents of experience and thought alike. It is sobering to reflect that it was taken for granted for over a century, by the greatest intellects of the era, that what is given in experience are ideas, that ideas are stored in the memory in the form of fainter copies, that thinking is combining and separating ideas. (It is an even more sobering thought that such profound misconceptions are again in vogue under the name of ‘internal representations’) Today accepted wisdom is articulated in such dicta as: the meaning of a sentence consists in its truth-conditions; or: the meaning of a word consists in its contribution to the truth-conditions of any sentence in which it occurs; or: there is something it is like to be conscious (to have conscious experience, to be a bat, or to be me!). Are these dicta carved on rock or writ in water, like the dicta of the early moderns?

More than other philosophical traditions, the analytic tradition in the twentieth century excelled at asking good questions rather than trying to an-

swer bad ones. That was no coincidence, since one strand running through the analytic tradition from Russell (theory of types) and the young Wittgenstein was a preoccupation with kinds of nonsense, with the boundaries between sense and nonsense, and with the diagnosis of the sources of nonsense. This too is a part of the analytic heritage that is being discarded in favour of this, that or the other *theory*.

Fourthly, it was an aspect of the Oxford phase of analytic philosophy (as it was of Wittgenstein's philosophy in Cambridge) to cultivate a refined sensitivity to the use of words. It was widely agreed among Cambridge analysts, Wittgenstein and his pupils, logical positivists, Oxford philosophers, and their numerous followers all over the world between the 1920s and the 1970s that *a*, if not *the*, main source of conceptual confusion was the misleading features of natural languages. If so, then the use of a problematic expression, its combinatorial possibilities, its implications, compatibilities and incompatibilities, the presuppositions of its use, and its comparison to related expressions in the same and in different semantic fields, all need meticulous scrutiny. Paul Grice wrote sapiently, 'Indeed, I will go further, and proclaim it as my belief that linguistic botanizing is indispensable, at a certain stage, in a philosophical enquiry, and that it is lamentable that this lesson has been forgotten, or has never been learned' [Grice (1986), p. 57]. Ryle and Austin excelled at linguistic botanizing and demonstrated its fruitfulness. In the next generation, Alan White and Bede Rundle were masters of this art, and used it to shed light upon problems of philosophy. It is a skill the teaching of which is currently neglected and the practice of which is vanishing. This is tantamount to throwing away a large part of the analytic heritage.

Whether analytic philosophy revives and survives, or whether it quietly slips into the shadows of history, it has been remarkable manifestation of the human spirit and its quest for understanding. At its finest, it displayed subtlety as well as depth, a striving for a synoptic view of a conceptual domain and a determined struggle to eradicate nonsense and intellectual mythology.

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NOTES

¹ I was surprised to see Hanjo insisting that Russell's views on philosophy were 'never remotely forgotten, even amongst those in thrall to his antipode Wittgenstein. They remained an indispensable point of reference for all analytic philosophers, even during the heyday of the distinction between philosophy and science' [Glock (2008), p. 136]. If this means that well read philosophers of the day were aware of the views of their predecessor, then of course that is true. If it means that it was a guideline for all, then it is false. If it means that it was something to be taken into account by all and discussed, that too is false. The Russellian conception of philosophy was not a topic of debate, but only an object for rejection, in the 1950s and 1960s, until it was revived by Quine in the USA. As Ryle wrote in 1957 'It comes natural to us now – as it did not 30 years ago – to differentiate logic from science much as Wittgenstein did; it comes natural to us not to class philosophers as scientists or *a fortiori* as super-scientists . . . '.

² For detailed discussion, see Baker and Hacker (1984), ch. 9, and Fischer (2000).

³ For detailed discussion, see Hacker (2007), ch. 9.

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