

Analytic Philosophy, Continental Literature?

Marc Champagne argues that the supposedly 'professional' style of the analytic tradition does not ensure professionalism, nor indeed, clear-mindedness.

"I hope there will always be, included in philosophy, a kind of literature which I could not by any possibility write."

C. I. Lewis, *The Philosophy of C. I. Lewis* (1968), ed. P.A. Schilpp.

One of the big philosophical questions is: How should one do philosophy? Sir Karl Popper gave a permissive answer when he wrote that "There is no method peculiar to philosophy" (preface to his *Logic of Scientific Discovery*, 1934). Popper might well be right. Even so, the needs of communication clearly impose some need for uniformity. Hence, every author exposed to the flows of both negative and positive reinforcement about how to write philosophy has nurtured a little homunculus – a censor that sits atop their shoulder, and, in advance of any exposure to scrutiny by their peers, dispenses advice about possible choices of words and phrases. This is a fate common to philosophy students. With this in mind, we can clearly discern two major strands in current philosophy – the so-called 'analytic' and 'continental' traditions. This philosophical double-entry book-keeping has been going on for a century now. Philosophers who want to be peacemakers sometimes deny the existence of this division, but I find it rather hard to doubt so blatant a fact. Beyond their predilections for certain subject-matters, each side has its own classic texts, heroes, and villains. These dictate ahead of inquiry not only what properly counts as an interesting topic, but what is an interesting way of tackling it.

Stylistic Differences

Now one claim reiterated with increasing frequency and boldness in both print and electronic media by some analytic philosophers is that what sets their camp apart is a shared adherence to 'professional' standards. Implicitly, it is implied that continental thinkers are not 'professional' in what they do; or if they are, that their skills are literary rather than philosophical in nature. Literature can be a powerful medium for the communication of ideas. However, when analytic philosophers say that they have moved beyond literature, they consider it a boast: the 'literary' label is used to denigrate continental thinkers, who therefore do not need to be taken seriously. American philosopher Brian Leiter, for instance, writes on his popular blog that he is "genuinely hopeful that over the next generation Party Line Continentalists will be exiled entirely to literature departments."

Analytical argumentation is also often thought to differentiate the different schools of philosophy. Some major figures of the continental tradition, such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lacan, and Derrida have favoured a non-argumentative [that is, a non-analytical] approach. Yet, if argumentation is about making a point, and if the same point can be made without it, then employing argumentation does not seem mandatory for philosophy. Consider the work of John McDowell, who is noted for his reliance on inventive imagery



Laying out the cards: some family resemblances

as a means of 'diagnosing' philosophic ailments. Engaging with themes and thinkers in the analytic tradition, such as Gottlob Frege, Donald Davidson, Gareth Evans, and Michael Dummett, McDowell's approach consists of "exposing mistaken assumptions in pictures which have held us captive in their grip and, once we have realized the error of our way of seeing things, it puts forward new pictures" (S.M. Dingli, *On Thinking and the World*, 2005, p.195). For example, in his book *Mind and World* (1996), McDowell says that if we picture the conceptual realm as an expanse bounded by the implications of experience, we will expect justification to reach beyond that fabric, thus attempting the impossible. Notice that this refutation is made by means of images, not arguments.

Judged by the quantity of scholarly attention he has received, McDowell is a successful philosopher. However, in *Reading McDowell* (N.S. Smith, ed., 2002), Crispin Wright fears that McDowell might be bringing back "barriers of jargon, convolution, and metaphor" which Wright thinks have been absent since "the academic professionalization of the subject." In an attempt to safeguard "the care and rigor which we try to instill into our students," Wright warns those students that "McDowell is a strong swimmer, but his stroke is not to be imitated." McDowell's response in the same book is: "If analytic philosophy prohibits imagery except for rare special effect, and precludes letting the full import of a term... emerge gradually in the course of using it, as opposed to setting down a definition at the start, I do not care if I am not an analytic philosopher." McDowell is clearly unfazed by the fact that Wright "drums [him] out of the regiment of analytic philosophers" – an amused expression he borrows from Richard Rorty, "who of course often gets his epaulettes slashed off."



Branded!

The 'Professionalisation' of Philosophy

For many people, the expression 'professional philosopher' sounds like an oxymoron, so calls for expulsion from its ranks can seem puzzling. Strictly speaking, all one needs to do to establish one's pedigree as a 'professional philosopher' is to provide evidence that one is salaried in that capacity. Anyone familiar with the history of the discipline cannot help but notice some irony here, since for Plato, one of the Founding Fathers of Western philosophy, the obtaining of monetary reward for their thought automatically disqualified someone from being a true 'lover of wisdom', and made them a Sophist. Perhaps a good way to describe the current situation would be to say that this classical standard has now been turned completely on its head. However, given that the majority of thinkers writing in the continental tradition are also employed in academia, the analytic proponent cannot appeal to the bare criterion of remuneration in order to cordon off her rivals.

It is always other professionals who decide who counts as a professional. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn stressed the role that such clubbiness plays in ensuring the cohesion of disciplines (in his study it was scientific disciplines, but the point may be applied generally). Through his distinction between 'normal' and 'revolutionary' science, Kuhn showed that there are long interludes when communities of scientists are committed to *not* questioning their shared core assumptions.

The analytic philosophers at Kuhn's university largely dismissed him as a philosophical lightweight: when he applied for tenure, they relegated him to a history department. I nevertheless think Kuhn's ideas have had a lasting impact on how the analytic tradition sees itself. Indeed, in a Kuhnian manner, between short-lived episodes of turmoil, are lengthy periods where the philosophical status quo reigns supreme and rival proposals are debarred outright. And further, in the hands of analytic philosophers, who see their central goal as the piece-

meal clarification of linguistic confusions, Kuhn's notion of a *paradigm* of shared core assumptions can vindicate their assertion of the special value of their goal and its method.

Analytic philosophers have often been reproached for the remoteness of their technical craft, but somewhere along the way they have figured out that if they band together tightly enough, their way of perceiving philosophy can be impermeable to such external criticisms. Philosophers are suspicious of circularity in arguments (we consider it a fallacy, in fact), but we should be suspicious of institutional circularity too. Thus, without checks and balances from the outside (or a dose of open-minded humility on their own behalf), for philosophers fixated on displaying appropriate markers, their self-serving idea of professionalism can easily create "a self-perpetuating clique, like freemasons" (Jonathan Rée, *Radical Philosophy* #1, 1972).

When one finds conformity on such a large scale, there are usually channels of communication involved. Faculty selection and student admission committees are important gears in the reproduction of professional academic structures. Another typical dispatcher of consensus about professional philosophy among non-continental academics is the *Philosophical Gourmet Report* – a biannual listing which ranks universities exclusively on the basis of the name recognition that their philosophy faculty generates. Generally, in an electronic sea of texts, rankings based on peer opinions have become the main compass of respectability for many academic philosophers. Naturally, when the appraised are the appraisers, the assessments tend to be positive. The *Gourmet* website itself goes as far as stating that "analytic philosophy is now largely coextensional with good philosophy and scholarship." Yet as Hans-Johann Glock writes in his book *What is Analytic Philosophy?* (2008), "just as theists should not be allowed to define God into existence, analytical philosophers should not be allowed to define themselves into excellence."

An Anti-Continental Missile...

As a case study precisely of analytic philosophers defining philosophical value into existence, consider Mario Bunge's *Philosophical Dictionary* (2003). Yet rather than defining analytic philosophy into excellence, Bunge defines continental philosophy into mediocrity. Here for instance is his entry for a staple continental notion, Martin Heidegger's *Dasein*:

"DASEIN: Being-there. The trademark of existentialism. In some texts, *Dasein* = Real existence. In others, *Dasein* = Human existence. In still others *Dasein* = Consciousness. The hermeneutic difficulty is compounded by the recurrent phrase "*das Sein des Daseins*," i.e., the being of being-there. Related terms not yet used by existentialists: *Hiersein* (Being-here), *Dortsein* (Being-over-there), *Irgendwosein* (Being-somewhere), and *Nirgendwosein* (Being-nowhere)... *Jetztsein* (Being-now), *Dannsein* (Being-then), *Irgendwannsein* (Being-sometime), and *Niemalssein* (Being-never)... Note how natural these combinations sound in German, and how clumsy their English counterparts sound. Which proves that German (when suitably macerated) is the ideal language for existentialism. A number of deep metaphysical questions involving these concepts can be framed. For example, '*Was ist der Sinn des Daseins?*' (What is the sense of Being-there-whenness?) '*Was ist das Sein des Nirgendniemalseins?*' (What is the being of Being-never-nowhereness?)... A systematic exploration of this vast family of expressions might lead to a considerable extension of existentialism."

This passage is funny, but also telling. It is significant that the mockery was regarded as permissible or appropriate, and that the target is deemed sufficiently discredited, and so the attack not likely to attract any significant opprobrium. And it is not merely that *Dasein* was not regarded worthy of a serious entry in a dictionary of philosophy (a dictionary not qualified as ‘analytic’, but announced as ‘philosophy’ *tout court*); rather, the notion was displayed as a comical counterpoint, to exemplify by way of contrast what a ‘good’, that is, an analytic, notion might look like. It is however unfortunate that Bunge did not make the effort to comprehend what is at stake in *Dasein*. He is perspicacious enough to observe that the term is applied equally to ‘Real existence’, ‘Human existence’, and ‘Consciousness’; then he hastily glosses these multiple meanings as a weakness. But that, as it happens, is Heidegger’s point: *Real* existence is *Human* existence, and *Consciousness* cannot be divorced from it. Much current cognitive science, with its emphasis on embodiment and situated cognition, is slowly confirming this view. In fact, the title of Andy Clark’s influential 1997 book on robotics, *Being There*, is a nod to *Dasein*.

Bunge’s pot-shot was aimed at an established target. In a 1932 paper on ‘The Elimination of Metaphysics through a Logical Analysis of Language’, Rudolph Carnap singled out excerpts from Heidegger’s writing and subjected them to similar analytic criticism – showing how, for example, Heidegger uses certain words as both a substantive and a verb – a major offence for Carnap (who, I assume, would also have to rescue us from the deleterious influence of the word ‘fish’). So choosing to belittle *Dasein* is not at all a risky move analytically; in fact, it is arguably more a rite of passage amongst analytic philosophers – even though Gilbert Ryle recalls that, in the days when such dismissals were first being ritualized, “most of us had never seen a copy of [Heidegger’s] *Sein und Zeit*” (Ryle, O.P. Wood and G. Pitcher, eds., 1960).

...That Can Bounce Right Back

Like Carnap, Bunge is obviously bothered by the prospect of adopting methods of thought that lead to vacuous exercises in wordplay, and evidently thinks that continental schools, as exemplified by Heidegger, have foundered into such verbiage. When he writes that “A systematic exploration of this vast family of expressions might lead to a considerable extension of existentialism,” the growth alluded to is clearly considered intellectually malignant. Gratuitously combining arbitrary notions and then exploring the myriad interrelations that ensue, is thus a methodological perversion.

Bunge suggests that such expansion is endemic of the continental tradition. Maybe it is. However, excess verbal growth is endemic of the analytic tradition too. To show this, let me parody Bunge’s dictionary entry. Take a word – any word (the more banal the better). Add to it the suffix -ism. It is then no longer a word, but a philosophical position, which can be scrutinised by the analytic intellect. In this way, any word can demonstrate the analytic method in a similar way to how Bunge defined *Dasein*. (Should this position carve out a space no one occupies, this need cause no worry: the -ism can yield anonymous -ists, defined as people who *would* uphold the relevant tenets.) Were we to pick the word ‘juxtaposition’, for instance, we could obtain the following analysis:

“JUXTAPOSITIONISM: A stance in the philosophy of such-and-such. We may distinguish between two forms of juxtapositionism: *weak* juxtapositionism and *strong* juxtapositionism. The weak juxtapositionist differs from the strong juxtapositionist in that she does not endorse the thesis that juxtapositionism should be seen in realist terms. The strong juxtapositionist is more ontologically committed, holding that juxtaposition entails not only instrumental, but real, consequences, and thus betokens a true state of affairs. Recent debate has focused on whether weak juxtapositionism is internally consistent. A more moderate re-evaluation has sought to retain the basic features of weak juxtapositionism whilst incorporating some of the realist commitments of strong juxtapositionism. There thus emerges a more sophisticated *mixed* juxtapositionism. The chief desideratum of the mixed view is to buttress itself against the accusation of dogmatism while retaining the basic ideas. This view has yielded a fruitful juxtaposition-theoretic template whence future developments can unfold. A systematic exploration of this vast uncharted field might lead to a considerable extension of juxtapositionism generally.”

The analytic tradition is replete with such verbiage, gratuitously combining notions and then exhaustively exploring the myriad interrelations that ensue. What is the difference between this example and the previous one about *Dasein*? It is too simplistic to claim that the analytic tradition engages in professional philosophy whilst the continental tradition trades merely in literature. On the contrary, I would argue that, when a discipline isn’t held together merely by nepotism, the grasp of its subject matter can be articulated in more than one idiom, and so exiling dissidents becomes unnecessary.

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