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We, the Professional Sages: Analytic philosophy's arrogation of argument

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ABSTRACT: One claim reiterated with increasing boldness by the “analytic” tradition in philosophy is that what sets it apart from long-time rivals is a shared adherence to proper norms of argumentation. Gradated deviancy from this (supposedly univocal) canon by English-speaking practitioners has therefore raised important questions about who can repair under the banner “professional philosopher.” We will portray as deeply worrisome the idea that argumentation should secure not just conclusions, but disciplinary membership as well.

KEYWORDS: analytic philosophy, argumentation, continental philosophy, Thomas Kuhn, John McDowell, power, professionalism.

1. INTRODUCTION

For the sake of establishing the greater context of my discussion, I want to begin by quoting a well-summarized account from Michael Friedman's book, *A Parting of the Ways*. As he writes,

One of the central facts of twentieth-century intellectual life has been a fundamental divergence or split between the “analytic” philosophical tradition that has dominated the English-speaking world and the “continental” philosophical tradition that has dominated the European scene. The former tradition, in the eyes of many, appears to withdraw from the large spiritual problems that are the concern of every thinking person—the meaning of life, the nature of humanity, the character of a good society—in favor of an obsession with specific technical problems in the logical or linguistic analysis of language. Here philosophy has taken on the trappings of a scientific discipline, characterized by clarity of method and cooperative cumulative progress in the formulation and assimilation of “results,” but at the expense of all contact with the central philosophical problems that are of truly general concern beyond a small circle of narrow specialists. An engagement with the traditionally central problems of philosophy has thus been left to the continental thinkers, but the works of these thinkers, in the eyes of the more analytically inclined, appear to throw off all concern with clarity of method and cooperative cumulative progress in favor of a deliberate and almost wilful obscurity more characteristic of a poetic use of language than of ostensibly logical argumentative discourse. The divergence between the analytic and continental traditions has therefore been an expression within the world of professional philosophy of the much more general split C[harles] P[ercy] Snow famously identified between his opposing (and mutually uncomprehending) “two cultures”—that of the scientifically minded and that of the “literary

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intellectuals.” (Friedman 2000, p. ix)

Friedman’s characterization is irreproachable: peripheral traditions notwithstanding, there is indeed a great schism in philosophy. Moreover, it is entirely appropriate that Friedman should describe the split as involving two distinct “cultures.” Beyond their predilections for certain subject-matters, each philosophic side has its own history, its own classic texts, its own heroes, its own villains.

Language obviously acts as an important boundary enclosing these widely differing cultures, insofar as the analytic tradition mainly takes root in English-speaking countries (leaving its continental antipode to the complementary class of non-Anglophone countries—which, in fairness, is a fairly diverse agglomeration). But given that the division along linguistic boundaries is no longer as neat as it once was, perhaps the most relevant markers at play in the analytic/continental divide are idiomatic. Surveying the writings of each camp, one is struck by the pronounced disagreements on what is stylistically acceptable or desirable in developing an argument. To be sure, such norms are rarely explicitly stated. But they nevertheless form a backdrop of tacit assumptions that dictate ahead of inquiry proper not only what counts as an interesting topic, but as an interesting way of tackling it.

Every academic practitioner exposed to a sufficiently sustained flow of negative and positive reinforcement has perforce nurtured a little homunculus, a meta-cognitive censor that sits atop one’s shoulder and quietly suppresses this or that possible choice of word far in advance of any exposure to the scrutiny of one’s peers. That’s a fate common to all students of philosophy—some would even say that it’s why we enrol in school to begin with. The question, then, is whether those who converse by means of one particular set of guidelines are to be regarded as somehow superior.

2. PROFESSIONS OF PROFESSIONALISM

Given the nature of any social distinction, it goes without saying that a foreign intellectual culture is less desirable than one’s own; otherwise one would have joined it. So it is perhaps more fruitful to focus on a distinctive feature of the current schism. While Michael Friedman (rightly) locates the divergence “within the world of professional philosophy” (2000, p. ix) as a whole, many practitioners of the analytic style do not see the situation that way. One claim reiterated with increasing frequency and boldness in both print and electronic media by analytic philosophers is that what sets their camp apart from long-time rivals is a shared adherence to “proper” norms of argumentation. The continental tradition, by extension, is seen as riddled with sophistry and deliberate obscurantism.

Now the assertion that one is a professional is far from benign. In asserting it, one is not merely reporting that a given state of affairs obtains; one is also engaging in a performative act that asserts (in the demanding sense) one’s place in the social order. Moreover, since the notion of profession is intimately tied with economic considerations, the label becomes a sign that one is entitled to practice a service that leads to remuneration or capital earnings of some sort. Anyone familiar with the history of the discipline cannot help but notice the irony that arises, then, when the adjective is conjoined so as to obtain the expression “professional philosopher.” For the likes of Socrates and Plato, the obtainment of monetary reward automatically disqualified one

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from the ranks of true “lovers of wisdom.” Perhaps a good way to describe the current situation would be to say that this standard has been turned completely on its head. When a contemporary academic boasts that she is a “professional philosopher,” she is not thereby aligning her work with that of sophists who traffic principally in rhetoric. On the contrary, the point behind the title seems to be to put some distance between the putative “professional” and more disreputable claimants by erecting a wall of *Realpolitik* that segregates what are otherwise wholly disinterested pursuits (the annexed adjective and all it implies have not yet taken hold in the public consciousness, so it is refreshing to note that, for the lay person, the expression “professional philosopher” still rings as something of an oxymoron).

The means elected to secure this dismissal of foreign argumentative cultures are in themselves devoid of any philosophic content. Indeed, the criterion invoked—respectable socio-economic standing—does not speak to any substantive thesis. On this basis alone, all one needs to do to establish one’s pedigree as a *professional* philosopher is produce evidence that one is salaried in that capacity. Yet this is arguably too lax a construal, as it fails to adequately capture the situation at hand. Consider the case of Ayn Rand. Rand, who had contact with a small group of university-trained intellectuals, worked outside the establishment throughout her life yet sold millions of copies of her philosophical works (which include non-fiction essays). But the first collection of papers devoted to her thought, published four years after her death (Den Uyl and Rasmussen 1986), showed noticeable unease about incorporating such an iconoclast into the canon, taking to pains to state that its contributors were (presumably by contrast) “professional philosophers”—a fact reiterated no less than six times on the book’s back cover and preface. One wonders, however, whether these “professionals” will ever earn anywhere near what Rand did for *their* writing.

Perhaps the expression should then be taken as synonymous with “*academic* philosopher.” But given that the overwhelming majority of thinkers writing in the continental tradition are employed by one academic institution or another, the analytic proponent seeking to oust alternative ways of making a point cannot appeal to this bare criterion to cordon-off her rivals. So something more committal is needed than money and university affiliation.

The politics governing these ascriptions of legitimacy bubbled to the surface, for instance, in brusque comments made by Crispin Wright about John McDowell. McDowell is noted for his heavy reliance on inventive imagery as a means of “diagnosing” philosophic ailments, in Wittgensteinian fashion. As Sandra Dingli points out, McDowell’s approach “involves 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” (2005, p. 195). For example, in his influential book *Mind and World* (2002, pp. 24-45), McDowell contends that if we picture the conceptual realm as an expanse bounded by a periphery of experiential impingements, we will expect epistemic justification to reach beyond that fabric—thus attempting the impossible. This is a powerful claim. Yet notice how it is made, not by axioms, definitions, and syllogisms, but by means of imagery.

However, Crispin Wright has voiced fears that McDowell might simply be exhuming “barriers of jargon, convolution, and metaphor before the reader hardly less formidable than those characteristically erected by his German luminaries”—thus

fostering an obscurantism which Wright believes has been absent since “the academic professionalization of the subject” (2002, p. 157). In an attempt to safeguard “the care and rigor which we try to instill into our students” and to protect “the susceptible” from being wastefully carried away by the ideas of *Mind and World*, Wright warns that “McDowell is a strong swimmer, but his stroke is not to be imitated” (2002, pp. 157-158).

For the record, McDowell (2002, p. 291) has been singularly unfazed by the fact that Wright “drums me out of the regiment of analytic philosophers” (an amused expression which he borrowed from Richard Rorty, “who of course often gets his epaulettes slashed off,” (ibid., p. 304 n. 21)). Still, to the outsider not privy to the internal dynamics of the discourse at hand, this sort of expulsion may seem puzzling.

English-language academic philosophy is now in a post-purge period of its development, ruled over [...] by the velvet glove of a mass of analytic philosophers committed to a view of philosophy that is a mere shadow of what it once was [...]. This shadow was not created by a series of logical debates aiming at “truth,” but by a train of ideological and political struggles aiming at power. (Mann 2008, pp. 663-664)

3. AUTO-ACCREDITATION

What’s at work here is the self-conscious realization that philosophizing in the analytic style has reached a high degree of cohesion. Early in the twentieth century, scientifically-inclined figures like Bertrand Russell and Rudolf Carnap (and, after them, Willard V. O. Quine) argued that philosophers should approach their task as a collective endeavour. Given the decline of British Hegelianism, that call filled an important vacuum, and analytic philosophers, loosely gathered around a preoccupation with the “analysis” of epistemological issues via language, increasingly saw themselves as the vanguard of a bold new methodology. In the analytic literature, one finds a sustained uniformity in the vocabulary employed. Scholarly papers tend to take cognizance of the work done by colleagues, and the scope of the contributions is usually quite humble, adding only a choice titbit to an impressive and ever-growing edifice of intermeshed texts.

As in science, there is a palpable feeling (mistaken or not) that, thanks in large part to analytic philosophy, the discipline is (on average) moving forward. This, in turn, has underwritten a *further* claim, namely, that sustained collective participation in the analytic mode has brought upon the “professionalization” of the discipline—this last trait being construed as a laudable one.

It is not surprising that this should happen in philosophy. The discipline has been the site of some of the most distinctive developments in the twentieth century’s theoretical understanding of intellectual activity. Nowhere has this been more obvious than in the highly influential work of Thomas Kuhn. His *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), though severely selective in its historiography, nevertheless made sense of much scientific practice whilst pretty much disregarding the orthodox assumption that what bestows upon the endeavour a special status is its correspondence with a stable worldly domain. Coupled with anti-foundationalist critiques emerging independently within philosophy (I am here thinking mainly of Quine’s holistic view and W. Sellars’ critique of “the Given”), this led to a heightened awareness of the role that kinship plays in ensuring the cohesion and distinctness of academic disciplines. What

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ensued what an unprecedented disciplinary self-consciousness.

Yet it is instructive to ask: to which philosophic tradition does Kuhn's contribution belong? Interestingly, his views seem to have enjoyed a double-citizenship. In the hands of continental philosophers who see their central goal as emancipatory, the idea of a self-governing community ensuring the continuation and integrity of its disciplinary "paradigm" became a powerful tool of critique—a way to unveil the discursive mechanisms by which (bourgeois) power reproduces itself (Kuhn took exception to the use of his work by the New Left and social scientists generally, see his 2002, pp. 307-308). The appropriation of Kuhnian ideas in the analytic world was less enthusiastic, and took an altogether different turn. The relativistic implications nested in the controversial notion of incommensurability met with considerable resistance. Still, the core insights were hard to dismiss: dogmatism and wilful intellectual closure can actually improve the overall institutional strength of a discipline.

So in spite of vocal denunciations, I believe this important Kuhnian idea was secretly admired. For in the hands of analytic philosophers who see their central goal as the piecemeal clarification of linguistic confusions, the general framework can vindicate a certain self-assertiveness. No longer should such philosophical technicians apologize for the remoteness of their craft. Indeed, between short-lived episodes of turmoil are lengthy periods where the status quo reigns supreme and rival proposals are debarred outright, before they get an actual hearing. While Kuhn's work can and has been used to serve the cause of radical social critique, it also harbours a marked conservatism (a feature which Steve Fuller (2003) has done much to bring into focus). It is in this light that the recent talk of "professionalism" in analytic philosophy should be viewed.

Several institutional organs bear witness to this disciplinary self-consciousness. Topping the list in this regard is the so-called "Philosophical Gourmet" report, a biannual listing which ranks universities solely on the basis of whatever name recognition their faculty generates. Here the quest for academic prestige unfolds unabashedly. Only Anglophone institutions are included, the website stating in no uncertain terms that "'analytic' philosophy is now largely coextensional with good philosophy and scholarship" (www.philosophicalgourmet.com/2004/meaningof.htm). That statement obviously does not reflect the judgement of continental thinkers (for a sobering glimpse at what analytic philosophy looks like when viewed from the "other" side, see Boundas 2007). But when the appraisers are the appraised, it is no surprise that the resultant assessment is laudatory.

4. US AND THEM

In contrast with Wright, I think a philosopher like McDowell should be commended for taking the risks he does. While it may irk some to recognize it, metaphors are to theories what cults are to religions: precursors waiting to be sanctified by greater adoption. It takes a significant lack of hindsight not to recognize that today's accepted theories were once fledgling intuitions, and a matching lack of foresight not to recognize that today's tentative pictures may perhaps enjoy a likewise good fortune in the future. Although Wright obviously feels more at home in the last hundred years or so of Anglo-American philosophical discourse, one cannot help but wonder whether someone like Francis Herbert Bradley (was *he* a professional?) warned his students to be weary of the

disruptive idiom of a Bertrand Russell. In any event, Wright's paternalistic comments vis-à-vis McDowell's approach rest on a romanticized delusion: as we shall see shortly, barriers of jargon already exist, and what Wright is really bemoaning is a perceived changing of the guard.

Deplorably, instances abound of analytic philosophers tersely dismissing alternative argument cultures. Consider the *Philosophical Dictionary* written by McGill professor Mario Bunge (2003). Breaking with the usual format, this work is very polemical, and is peppered with highly personal commentaries ranging over sundry topics. Let's look at the entry for a staple of continental philosophy, Heidegger's notion of Dasein:

DASEIN Being-there. The trademark of existentialism. In some texts, Dasein = Real existence. In others, Dasein = Human existence. In still other 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). Along with such spatial categories we may introduce their chronological counterparts: *Jetztsein* (Being-now), *Dannsein* (Being-then), *Irgendwannsein* (Being-sometime), and *Niemalssein* (Being-never). On the other hand, *Ursein* (primordial-Being), *Frühsein* (Being-early), *Frühersein* (Being-earlier), *Spätsein* (Being-late), and *Wiedersein* (Being-again) have no spatial partners. (This asymmetry may suggest an interesting indictment of Einstein's special relativity theory.) [...] 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 Dawannseienden?' (What is the sense of Being-there-whenness?) 'Was ist das Sein des Nirgendniemalsseins?' (What is the being of Being-never-nowhereness?) 'Are you there-then Hans?' And 'What will Grete find there-later?' A systematic exploration of this vast family of expressions might lead to a considerable extension of existentialism [...]. (Bunge 2003, pp. 65-66)

Serious considerations to the side, this passage is admittedly funny. Still, it is telling. First and foremost, it is significant that the move was regarded as permissible or appropriate, and that the target was deemed sufficiently discredited so as to not attract any consequential opprobrium. It is not merely that Dasein was not regarded worthy of an entry in a dictionary of philosophy (here not qualified as analytic but hegemonically announced as "philosophy" *tout court*). Rather, the notion was pulled from the recycling bin and displayed as a comical counterpoint—ostensibly to exemplify by way of contrast what a "good" analytic notion looks like.

It is unfortunate that mister Bunge did not make the effort to comprehend what is at stake in Dasein. He is perspicacious enough to observe that it is applied equally to "Real existence," "Human existence," and "Consciousness," then hastily glosses this polysemy as a weakness. But that, as it happens, is the whole point, lying right there before his eyes: *Real* existence is *Human* existence and *Consciousness* cannot be divorced therefrom. Much current cognitive science, with its emphasis on embodiment and situated cognition, is slowly bearing this out. In fact, the title of Andy Clark's influential book, *Being There* (1998), is a nod to Dasein.

This deplorable lack of appreciation notwithstanding, Bunge's dismissive pot-shot was aimed at an established target. In a classic paper on "The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language" published in 1932, Rudolph Carnap singled out

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choice excerpts from Heidegger and subjected them to criticism, showing how, for example, the author uses certain words as both a substantive and a verb (a major offence for Carnap). So choosing to belittle the notion of Dasein is not at all a risky move; in fact, it is arguably more a rite of passage amongst analytic philosophers—even though Gilbert Ryle recalls that in the early days when such practices were being canonized “most of us had never seen a copy of *Sein und Zeit*” (Ryle 1960, p. 10). Interestingly, early-on in his career, Carnap had enthusiastically studied *Being and Time*, attending a Switzerland conference where Heidegger was debating and even astonishing his Vienna Circle colleagues with his ability to interpret Heidegger’s difficult work (see Friedman 2000, p. 8). The split with the continent, however, has since been fully consummated.

5. NOT MUCH DIFFERENCE

Following in the footsteps of Carnap, Mario Bunge is clearly bothered by the prospect of adopting methodologies that lead to vacuous exercises in wordplay. Although he makes his point obliquely, Bunge obviously thinks continental schools have foundered into precisely such verbiage. When he writes that “A systematic exploration of this vast family of expressions might lead to a considerable extension of existentialism” (Bunge 2003, p. 66), the growth alluded to is an intellectually and philosophically malignant one. Gratuitously combining arbitrary notions and then exploring the myriad interrelations that ensue is thus a perversion of proper methodology that should be avoided. Accordingly, whatever library shelves might be filled by means of such a misguided matrix can be dismissed offhand, without meticulous study.

Fair enough. After all, I have elsewhere pushed for a “hermeneutic impatient with hermeneutics” and advocated principled epistemological intolerance with “linkages that extend on the sole basis of speculation” (Champagne 2007, pp. 242, 201). But Bunge’s chosen example, existentialism, is held to be representative, and the underlying claim being advanced is that this sort of otiose expansion is endemic of the *continental* tradition. That’s no doubt a comforting idea for an analytic philosopher to entertain, yet is it really so? Again, the truth of the matter lies right before the author’s eyes but, owing to partisanship, goes unseen.

Consider the following, fictitious, entry. Take a word—any word (the more banal the better). Then add to it the suffix -ism. It is then no longer a word, but a position (should the stance carve out a topical space no one really occupies, this need cause no worry: the -ism can yield anonymous *-ists* defined as those who *would* uphold the relevant tenet(s)). To illustrate, let’s pick the word “juxtaposition.” Once this is done, a declension along the following lines can readily be obtained (again, the following is *not* a real entry, although it could just as easily be):

JUXTAPOSITIONISM A stance in the philosophy of such-and-such. We may distinguish between two forms of juxtapositionism. *Weak* juxtapositionism can be contrasted with *strong* juxtapositionism. The weak juxtapositionist differs from the strong juxtapositionist in that she does not endorse the further thesis that the stance should glossed in realist terms. The strong juxtapositionist is more ontologically committed, holding that the juxtaposition under consideration entails not only instrumental, but real, consequences, and thus betokens a true state of affairs. Weak juxtapositionists usually argue that the strong variant overdoes the basic commitments of the stance, as all that is required by juxtapositionism per se is the bare presence of the juxtaposition. The supplementary additions, on this reading, are not warranted. Recent debate

has focused on whether this last criticism is tenable, that is, whether weak juxtapositionism is itself internally consistent. Arguments in favour of the internal inconsistency of weak juxtapositionism are twofold. First, there has been an increasing sense that the very project of juxtapositionism is fundamentally flawed, being premised on a dogmatic dichotomy between juxtaposed and juxtaposing (So-and-so is a major proponent of this revised, non-dogmatic, view). Second, a more moderate re-evaluation of the position has sought to retain the basic features of weak juxtapositionism while incorporating some of the realist commitments of strong juxtapositionism. There thus emerges a more sophisticated *mixed* juxtapositionism, the programmatic outlines of which have been articulated in the works of So-and-so and So-and-so (although So-and-so has refused to identify herself as a mixed juxtapositionist). The chief desideratum of the mixed view is to buttress itself against the accusation of dogmatism while retaining the basic distinction. Although there is as yet no consensus on whether mixed juxtapositionism is itself immune to the more traditional criticisms levelled at the weaker stance it seeks to supersede, the proposal itself 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 verbiage like this, gratuitously combining notions and then exhaustively exploring the myriad interrelations that ensue. What's the difference between this example and the previous one about Dasein? Well, according to some, that's easy: the first is unprofessional, this one isn't.

6. CONCLUSION

So what's a philosopher to do: pick a side and deride the opposing party's way of putting a point across, or rise above the fray? Partisanship is unattractive, and neutrality is perhaps unattainable. Still, it would be disheartening if the late-twentieth century Parisian intelligentsia which analytic philosophy so abhors was correct in its cynical insistence that when we venture into such meta-philosophical questions the only tenable realization we can come to is that, in the end, might makes right.

[B]ureaucratic institutions, as any student of Max Weber knows, tend to fight for their territories tooth and nail, rarely agreeing to cede administrative province to a rival without some sort of concrete political and economic pressure. Added to this is the fact that most current academic philosophers who run philosophy departments do not want these lost provinces back anyway, taking pride in their splendid isolation from engaged philosophy. (Mann 2008, p. 675)

That's a fair description of the current situation. Is full regime collapse needed (as the quote's author suggests at the close of his article, *ibid.*)? Some have argued that this is already under way, only analytic philosophers don't know it yet. The historian John Deely, for example, believes that "the philosophical establishment within the academy has become to philosophy's future what the judges of Galileo were to the future of science," and surmises that "That is how the story of philosophy will appear when our successors look back on the twentieth century" (2001, p. viii).

For reasons I shall not develop here, I would tend to agree. That prediction notwithstanding, I'll gladly leave the "professionalism" talk to other disciplines, and allow philosophy—traditionally, "the love of wisdom"—to call into question established modes of argumentation or try new ones without any fear of reprimand. If not us, who? Surely there's a little place in the university setting for those who put the pursuit of truth ahead of the quest for professional respectability. If not, then perhaps it is time to

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relocate.

Notable exceptions notwithstanding, I am not fond of the continental tradition; neither its aims nor its methods. Still, I am often ashamed to see those who share in this sentiment mistakenly see it as a license to indulge in dogmatic closure. Not only does the inference not follow, the false sense of superiority it provides is patently unbecoming. But one of the problems is that thinkers who work in English and are conversant with both analytic and continental writings but pledge allegiance to neither are currently displaced persons in academia: we don't even have a name.

Of course, the label "philosopher" used to suffice. But it seems the genus now calls for a differentia, a prefix that will further refine group membership. There is cause to worry about this trend, for as Karl Popper rightly stated fifty years ago, "There is no method peculiar to philosophy" (1959, preface). Anybody who thinks otherwise is simply deluded—the victim of a methodological short-sightedness brought on by prolonged intellectual commerce solely with like-minded people. A pluralism of method, however, doesn't mean there is no truth of the matter or that anything goes, any more than the acknowledgement that one can get to Rome several ways means there are several Romes. Much the opposite: *to the extent a discipline bears upon something other than itself and isn't held together merely by inter-textual nepotism, the grasp of its object can be articulated independently in any idiom, such that policing dissidents becomes not a sign of maturity but a reflexive confession of vacuity.*

To be sure, this admonition applies equally well to the continental tradition. But given the issue discussed, namely the questionable idea that the specific culture of argumentation fostered in analytic circles somehow has a greater claim to "professionalism," it is perhaps appropriate to apply Popper's motto and close with a quote from John McDowell, which I wholly endorse: "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" (2002, p. 291).

[Link to commentary](#)

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