

Analytic philosophy abroad and the dictator lookalikes paradox

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. In this paper, I present some obstacles I envisage analytic philosophy facing as it spreads abroad. I use a paradox to illustrate these obstacles.

Analytic philosophy, which sometimes seems to me so English, is spreading. Regarding its spread, it is natural to anticipate that it will face certain problems, though perhaps reality is much stranger than these anticipated problems.

Even if there are people in other societies who already do work in an analytic way, there are likely to be obstacles to including them in “our research community.” One obstacle has to do with political preferences – that is easy to anticipate – and the other is what I call a “sub-topic bridging problem,” which is a bit harder to anticipate. I have come up with a little paradox which I shall use to illustrate the two obstacles I have in mind: “the dictator lookalikes paradox” I call it.

Let us imagine some people who live under a dictatorship. They discuss a puzzle composed of these propositions:

- (1) The dictator must stand out from ordinary people. His greatness must be evident from his mere appearance (or hers must be). He must be iconic.
- (2) The dictator needs imitators, convincing ones, otherwise he can be easily spotted and killed.
- (3) If the dictator has convincing imitators, then he does not stand out from ordinary people.

One cannot coherently accept all three propositions, it seems. Let us further imagine that within their society, they have a discourse on the puzzle, involving discussion of different solutions, and also how we experience the appearance of others, the nature of imitation, what it is to be an ordinary person, and so forth.

What would happen if one of our analytic philosophers encountered this research community? They might well be politically opposed to incorporating members into the community of analytic philosophy researchers. “I am not including people who work on solving the problems of non-democratic systems.” That is the political preferences obstacle.

Even if you are not politically opposed, there is the subtopic bridging problem. Some topics are within broader topics. And this paradox I have presented would seem to be within political philosophy, understood roughly as philosophy which deals with problems of government: it is a sub-topic within that broader topic. “If you are interested in problems of government, it is a good idea to talk with our analytic political philosophers,” one might advise a person working on this dictator puzzle. But, as far as I can see, the puzzle is quite distant from the rest of analytic political philosophy. One can understand the puzzle and solutions to it, one can realize that these are skilled researchers, but it is unclear how one can bring philosophers working on it into dialogue with our analytic political philosophers, who work on other subtopics within this broader topic. I anticipate that both problems will arise.

Reference. Williamson, T. 2021. Message. *Review of Analytic Philosophy* (1): 1.